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RANCH ROMANCES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
FIRST MARCH NUMBER

FEATURING
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BRIDE OF TREACHERY
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RANCH FLICKER TALK
By The Famous Movie Star
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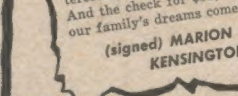
HOW TO SOLVE SAMPLE PUZZLE

CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.



You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract, the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST
MARCH NUMBER

February 25, 1955
Volume 190, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

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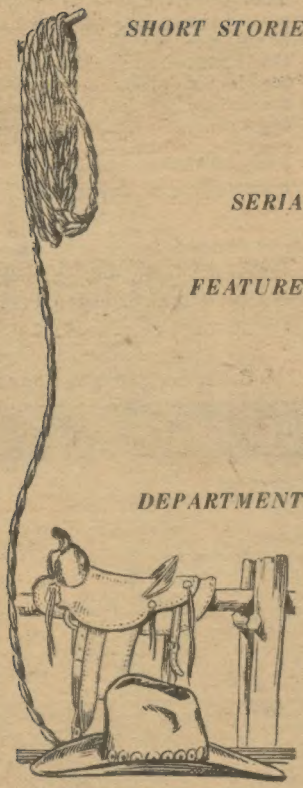

HELEN TONO
Editor

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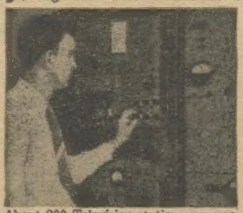
Television Making Good Jobs, Prosperity—Even without Television, Radio is bigger than ever. 115 million home and auto Radios are big market for servicing. 3000 broadcasting stations use operators, technicians. Government, Aviation, Police, Ship, Micro-wave Relay, Two-way Radio Communications for buses, taxis, trucks, R. R. are growing fields. Television is moving ahead fast.



About 200 Television stations are now on the air. Hundreds of others being built. Good TV jobs opening up for Technicians, Operators, etc.

25 million homes now have Television sets. Thousands more are being sold every week. Get a job or have your own business selling, installing, servicing.

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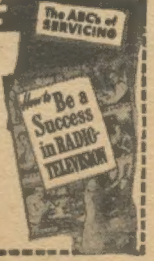

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5CQ
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.
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Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....Zone....State.....

VETS write in date of discharge .....

Tent Mates

Dear Editor:

Today we were reading "Our Air Mail" and decided we would like to join your correspondence club. We'd like some girls to correspond with us. Our ages range from 19 to 22. In general we like most hobbies and sports. We are all tent mates, and our addresses are the same. We are now stationed in Japan. Thank you for printing this.

BOB GRAVES
GLENN BROADUS
DONALD STARTRUCK
BILL G. KELLY
LOUIS E. BOSWELL

H. & E. Btry. 3rd Bn. 12th Mar.
3rd Marine Division F.M.F.
c/o F.P.O., San Francisco, Calif.

Collector

Dear Editor:

I read RANCH ROMANCES and enjoy it very much. I would like to put in a plea for some pen pals. I am 17 years old, have blond hair, blue eyes, and stand 5' 7" tall. I enjoy writing letters, reading, dancing, and most of all riding. My hobbies are collecting earrings and miniature horse statues. Hope to hear from all of you.

MARY LOU SMITH

Cottage San Star Route
Silver City, New Mexico

One Blue and One Green

Dear Editor:

I would like to make new friends of all ages. I am 32, 5' 7", weigh 180 lbs., have blond hair and one blue and one green eye. I don't like most sports, but I do enjoy horseback riding.

ROBERT DE WITT

South Star Route
Fort Morgan, Colo.

Truck Driver's Wife

Dear Editor:

This is my first try at getting into Our Air Mail. I'm a truck driver's wife, living in a logging town. I am 19 years old, have brown hair and green eyes. I would like to hear from guys and gals of all ages.

JEAN TRAMMELL

General Delivery
Payson, Ariz.

Young Sportsman

Dear Editor:

I am a 10-year-old boy, with brown hair and eyes, and am 4' 10" tall. I like hunting, fishing, and most other otudoor sports. Would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world.

CHARLES GLENN FRUGE

Box 15
Oberlin, La.

Traveling Lady

Dear Editor:

Please put my name in Our Air Mail. I'm a traveling gal from Ohio. I also like to write, dance, cook, sew, and collect postcards and information on the West. I'm 5' 6" tall, have dark brown hair, blue eyes. I'd like to hear from boys and girls between 15 and 20 years of age, especially Westerners who live on ranches. I will answer all letters and will exchange snaps.

KATHLEEN DOLLISON

806 Graint Avenue
Cambridge, Ohio

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Second Try

Dear Editor:

This is my second try at Our Air Mail and I sure hope you can find room for my letter. I am very interested in Indians and Western life, and I would be delighted to write to some Indian boys, girls, and servicemen. I am 16 years old, have reddish-blond hair and blue eyes. I am 5' 5" tall, weigh 120 lbs., and love all sports. I promise to answer all letters.

BECKY GRIEVE

R. D. #7, Prospect Pike
Marion, Ohio

Small Town Girl

Dear Editor:

I live in the country, and would like very much to learn more about other people. I have several hobbies—write me and I'll tell you all about them. My favorite hobby is collecting match folders from everywhere, and I'll exchange them with other collectors. I'll do my best to answer all letters, so come on and fill my mail box.

ETHEL POLLARD

Box 505
Hawkins, Texas

Lonely Widow

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonesome lady of 40, with brown eyes and brown hair. I love music, television, and fishing. My husband is dead, and I miss his companionship.

I'd like to correspond with people about 35 to 60 years old.

MARGARET RIDENOUR
53 S. 4th Street
Newark, Ohio

Friendly Soldier

Dear Editor:

I'm stationed with the Army in Korea. Having another year to stay here, I thought perhaps I could strike up some friendships by correspondence. I'm in my early twenties, single, friendly, easy to get along with an anxious to meet some girls. Hope I won't be disappointed.

PVT. JOHN MOSHER
R.A. 14 445 797
44th Surg. Hosp. (M.A.)
A.P.O. 358, San Francisco, Calif.

Letter Writer

Dear Editor:

I'd like to join your many Air Mail members if there is room for me. My favorite pastime is writing letters and making new friends. I'll correspond with anyone who wants to write, including lonely servicemen in hospitals and overseas. I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange photos.

JAMES G. MORSE
1575 Baker Street
Salem, Oregon

Girl Call

Dear Editor:

This is my first letter to Our Air Mail. I sure would like to hear from girls and boys between the ages of 15 and 18—girls especially. I am 18 years old, 5' 11½" tall, weigh 148 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. I don't have much time for fun, so how about filling my mailbox with letters to answer?

WILFRED RAYBURN
932 Mary St.
Lexington, Kentucky

Six-Footers Wanted

Dear Editor:

I'd like to make a plea for *tall* pen pals, preferably ones six feet or over. I am 20 years old, 6' tall, have dark brown eyes, reddish blonde hair. My hobby is collecting hillbilly songs. I live on a farm. I'd especially like to hear from tall *women;* I'd like to know I'm not the only six-foot girl in the United States.

BETTY JANE RIFFLE
Route 1, Box 17
Orlando, West Virginia

Sisters

Dear Editor:

Hope my letter will make Our Air Mail. I'm 5' 4" tall, weigh 123 lbs., have blonde hair and blue eyes. I'm 16 years old. My hobbies are swimming, softball, reading, writing letters, and cooking. I'd like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of 17 to 25. My sister would like to have some pen pals too. She's 15, and is also a blonde.

MARY SPARKS
SHIELA SPARKS
General Delivery
Elk City, Oklahoma

Sportswoman

Dear Editor:

I read your magazine and enjoy it very much. I would like to make a try for some pen pals. I have reddish-blonde hair, hazel eyes, I'm 5' 2" tall and weigh 109 lbs. I like all sports, but enjoy roller skating and horseback riding most of all. I'd like to exchange letters with anyone.

ESTELLA SHELDON
Route 1, Box 23A
Okanogan, Washington

Sergeants

Dear Editor:

We are three Air Force men stationed in Alaska who are about the most lonesome men alive, we think. Our aim in writing you is to see if we can get someone to correspond with us. We sure do appreciate mail, especially from the fair sex. If the girls from 21 to 40 would oblige we would be most thankful, and we'll endeavor to answer all letters.

M/SGT.'s M. N. DUNKERLY
J. O. COCHRAN
D. J. TAMMEN
54th Troop Carrier Sq. (H)
A.P.O. 942, Seattle, Wash.

Calling All Cowboys

Dear Editor:

I'm about 5' 5" and am 15 years old, with light brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are writing letters, reading books, and collecting books and music sheets. I'd like to correspond with boys and girls from 16 to 20, especially cowboys and cowgirls who really live on ranches and use horses. I promise to answer faithfully, and will exchange snapshots. So come on and write. I'll be waiting.

HELEN SCHOCH
1957 Morrell Street
Detroit 9, Michigan

One in a Million

Dear Editor:

I'd like you to put my name among your millions of requests for pen pals. I'm 5' 2½" tall, 13 years old, weigh about 123 lbs., have brown hair and blue eyes. I like basketball, baseball, football, swimming, horseback riding, skating, and walking through the woods. I'll answer all letters, from either boys or girls.

THELMA M. LEARY
Mountain Grove
Virginia

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

PEOPLE ARE pretty law-abiding in Seattle, Wash., judging by the reactions of a citizen who refused to chase a thief across a street because he didn't want to break the laws about jaywalking.

A PUPIL in a Des Moines, Iowa, school defined autobiography as "the life story of an automobile."

IN OMAHA, Neb., a store floor walker approached a woman shopper and told her she couldn't walk out of the toy department without showing her sales slip for the "doll" she was holding. The shopper couldn't produce a slip: the "doll" was her two-month-old daughter.

HICCOUGHS were the undoing of a Duncan, Okla., furniture dealer attending a livestock auction. He "hicced" each time the bid was raised, and went home the bewildered owner of six Shetland ponies.

ADDED to the hazards of being a politician in Sacramento, Calif., is the fact that school children visiting the state capitol building sometimes eat all the food in the cafeteria there, leaving none for the legislators.

PLACERVILLE, Calif., has turned loss into profit in disposing of its fallen trees. Instead of being hauled away, big trees are sold to sawmills, small ones are sawed up into two-foot lengths and left lying around so petty thieves can spirit them off.

A SLIGHTLY deaf Gallup, N. Mex., watchman claimed he didn't hear when told he was fired. He kept working for ten more days, then asked payment for the "overtime."

A LOS ANGELES, Calif., man caught and tamed a wild mountain robin, then regretted it when the bird took too well to civilization. It scorns birdseed and insists on such expensive foods as cherries, lettuce, bacon and bologna.

TWO MILWAUKEE, Wisc., burglars tried and tried again, and finally landed in jail. They broke into a dry cleaning firm, later returned with the tools necessary to open the cash register, then came back a third time after spending their loot in a tavern. On the third try they were spotted by police.

LIST AS A SIGN of progress in our mechanical age the announcement from a Seattle, Wash., college that a conveyor belt is being planned to transport students from the parking area to the campus center.

A COUPLE in Sturgis, Mich., signed a fire insurance contract just in time to pay for a fire which resulted when the insurance agent dropped a lighted cigarette on their sofa.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

The famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

VERA CRUZ

Two top stars get together in a story of high adventure . . . to make United Artists' new Western a movie you'll long remember

NEVER one to do things by halves, Burt Lancaster has produced a new movie which deserves all those adjectives Hollywood throws around—terrific, stupendous, and colossal.

It cost over three million dollars to make; it has a cast of over 500, plus an orchestra of 140 pieces; it was filmed entirely in Mexico in locations hundreds of miles apart; it's a spectacular costume show with a splendid array of stars. Its name is *Vera Cruz*.

Burt, of course, has a leading role, but top billing goes to Gary Cooper.

"That's how much I wanted Coop for this part," said Burt. "I expected to pay him handsomely, of course. But top billing! To an actor, that's like giving a pound of flesh."

Both of the leading male parts are tailor-made for these two stars. They are soldiers of fortune, gun fighters, who have come to Mexico in 1866 to hire out to whichever side in the Revolution is the highest bidder for their services.

Coop, who can play anything—and has, in his long career—enjoys portraying men of action better than any other kind of part.

"Liked playing this part," he said. "Gave me a chance to do some riding and shoot off a gun." That's gushing enthusiasm from the taciturn Gary.

In the movie, he's the only one who comes close to being a hero—and that's not because he's so virtuous but because the others are so unscrupulous.

He, for instance, plots to steal a fortune in gold and split it with Burt. But Burt goes him one better by trying to make off with the entire fortune by himself.

Then there's Cesar Romero as the faithless agent of the Emperor Maximilian, and Maximilian himself (George Macready), who is engaged in the biggest steal of all—the whole of Mexico.

Even the ladies of the story are far from noble. Denise Darcel plays a designing Countess, who actually makes off with that

hoard of gold. An actress new to American audiences, Sarita Montiel, is the closest thing to a heroine in the picture, but even she picks Gary's pockets.

Don't think the picture is grim, just because everyone in it has at least a touch of rascality. Rogues can be very entertaining when they're charming daredevils, willing to risk their necks for fun or fortune.

The story is thrilling, but the setting of *Vera Cruz* is spectacular. One of the scenes cost $150,000 to film. It's a huge reproduction of the interior of Maximilian's fabulous palace. Priceless antiques were borrowed and hired—none of them was for sale—for the set.

Another scene of Maximilian's palace is equally dazzling and cost the company nothing. After weeks of conferences and deliberation, Mexico's Minister of Public Education gave the producers permission to film the real thing, the Chapultepec Palace, which is now a national museum. For one 24-hour period the palace was closed to visitors, and the *Vera Cruz* company was given free rein to act out the events of history where they really happened. Guards, of course, were posted just out of camera range to keep an eye on the treasures. After all, there were several hundred people, extras and crew, milling around. Burt drew a deep sigh of relief when the 24 hours were up and all the priceless antiques were intact.

Doubtless the Minister of Public Education did too.

Most of the rest of the movie was filmed in the wilderness. A convoy of special cars, trucks and jeeps carried the regular company and crew, 250 strong, to remote locations over roads built 400 years ago by the explorer Cortez ("and," said Burt, "never repaired since"). One of these roads even petered out before they had reached their destination, and the construction men had to hack a new passage through the jungle.

So you know, if they went to all that trouble, Vera Cruz *must* be worth seeing.

The pace is fast for adventurers Burt Lancaster and Gary Cooper

TAB HUNTER
Three-Career Man

TAB HUNTER is a one-career man—one at a time, that is. He's on his third right now, at the advanced age of 23.

It may be somewhat inaccurate to call the other two "careers" because they never paid him a penny, but he worked at them with just as much enthusiasm as he does at his acting career at the moment.

His first passion was riding. When he was 12 he could take a jumper over a high hurdle, and he has a drawer full of blue ribbons for his horsemanship. He accomplished this without owning a horse, or even having much money to rent one, since his mother alone was supporting his brother and him and there was not much provided in the budget for amusements.

Just about the time he began to excell as a horseman, his interest in the sport began to wane. He developed a crush on Sonja Henie and this led to a passion for ice skating. He spent every free hour practicing. He won several championships and still retains his amateur standing with the idea of some day competing again.

He took up his third career—acting—without much enthusiasm. Having lived in California almost all his life, and being big and blond, he was used to friends telling him he ought to be in the movies. He never took this suggestion very seriously. In fact, it was with reluctance that he gave up a job as a sheet metal worker when one of those friends actually got him a part, which consisted of the line, "Hi, Eddie," and which ended up entirely on the cutting room floor.

This convinced him that movie-making was not for him. It did not convince the friend, who decided that the whole trouble was with his name, Arthur Galien, and took the problem to an agent.

The conversation—so the story goes—went like this:

The friend said, "We've got to tab him something."

The agent said: "He likes to ride, doesn't he?"

"Yes—jumpers especially."

"No, not jumpers—hunters!"

Then in unison: "Tab Hunter!"

This fine new name did not change his luck. In fact, Tab was quite content just to be working, especially when he got a job as a soda jerk right near a skating rink.

But he didn't turn down the big chance when it came two years later. He was offered a leading part in *Island of Desire* with Linda Darnell. Now, only four movies later, Tab has zoomed to the top of the popularity polls.

His enthusiasm for his career has also zoomed, and he works at it as hard as he's ever worked at anything. In fact, he's so busy reading plays and scripts that he hardly has time to ride or skate any more.

He likes to have fun, too, and has frequently dated such Hollywood lovelies as Debbie Reynolds, Lori Nelson and Terry Moore. But he thinks it's not time to get serious. Right now his career comes first.

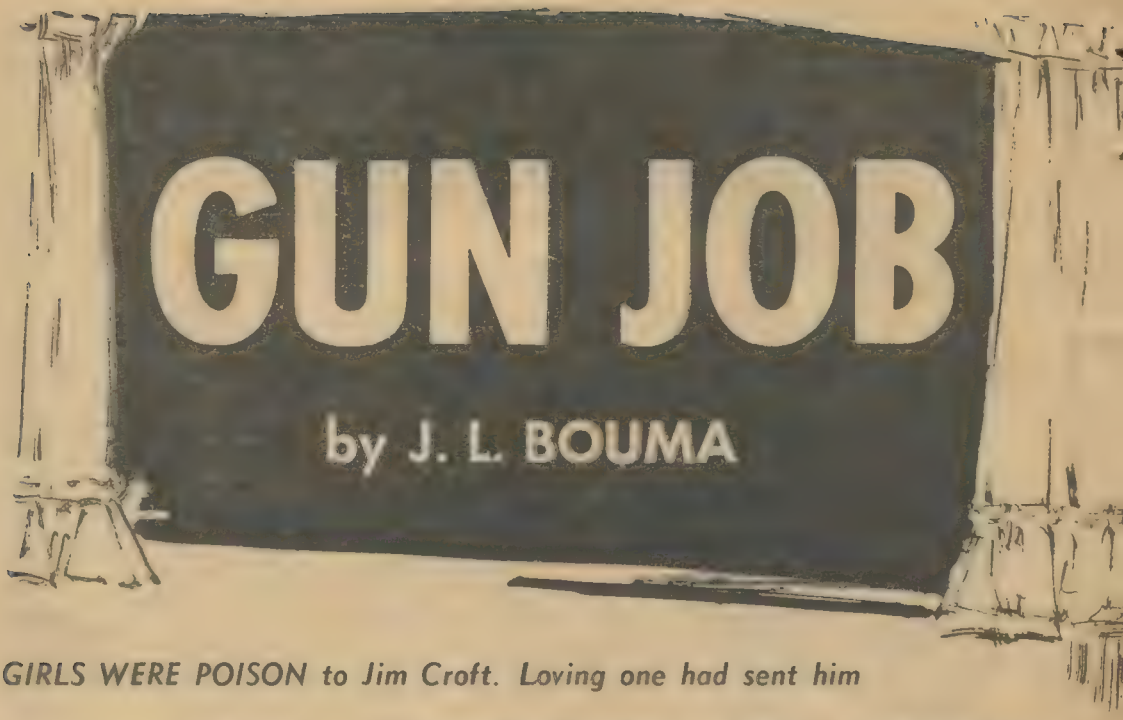
"And besides," he told me, "I never stay in town long enough to get to know a girl really well."

His roles have made him a world traveler. He went to Jamaica and to England for *Island of Desire*, to the state of Washington for *Track of the Cat*, and now he's off to Hawaii with John Wayne for *Sea Chase*.

"So you see what happens," he said. "I date a girl, then I make a movie, and by the time I get back she's married to someone else."

Warner Bros.

Reaching the top in any field he tackles is a habit with Tab



GIRLS WERE POISON to Jim Croft. Loving one had sent him to jail . . . and helping another was likely to get him killed

THE DEALER raked in Croft's bet and murmured, "Tough. You'd think after five years in that hell hole you'd end up having a little luck."

Jim Croft shrugged and looked out at Yuma's dusty street with boredom and apathy. He was a big, hard, bony man with a sun-punished face and brooding eyes.

"Out two weeks and I'm already getting restless," he said. "Time to move on."

A girl came slowly past the window, hesitated in front of the batwings, and entered. Croft regarded her without interest, a slender girl with a delicately-made face and dark hair. As she looked around, the bartender came forward shaking his head.

"Sorry, Miss. We don't serve ladies in here."

"I don't wish to be served," the girl said. "I'm looking for a Mr. Jim Croft. They told me at the hotel that I might find him here."

Croft frowned. The girl was a stranger to him. He rose and said "I'm Jim Croft."

She studied him for a moment, then slowly smiled. "I'm Emma Stanton, Johnny's sister. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Croft saw she was upset, perhaps frightened, though her gaze was level, her mouth firm. Her dark hair was gathered to a knot

low on her neck, and she wore a small hat ablaze with artificial flowers. Into this dingy saloon she had brought an air of freshness and of youth. Yet the sight of her had all the old and bitter memories somersaulting violently through Croft.

He gathered his money and escorted her outside. Though it was not yet noon, the sun already had a hammering force, and the air held an oven's heat that shimmered above the adobes and jacales of Yuma.

He stopped and said curtly, "How did you find me?"

"You wrote Johnny that you had no immediate plans, so I took a chance and came here. I arrived only about an hour ago."

"Why?"

"Johnny needs you. He's mentioned you time and again, wishing you were back, but he didn't feel he had the right to ask you. So I—" She looked around. "Please, isn't there some other place we can talk?"

Croft said, "Come along," not liking any of this. She had something on her mind, and he wanted no part of it. Still, it would be unseemly to make his excuses and leave her standing here.

He led her to the corner livery stable and said to the hostler, "A team and buggy, please." The hostler said it would take a few minutes, and disappeared down the runway.

Croft put a boot on a bale of hay, an elbow on his knee. "Johnny often spoke of you. You were living in Ohio, I believe."

"Yes, with an aunt. I came West right after Johnny took over your ranch."

HE MADE a sound of grim amusement. "You meant to say right after I was sent to the prison here for manslaughter, didn't you?"

Her eyes remained level on his. "I might have said that, but I saw no reason for it. Do you want to tell me about it?"

An annoyed expression tightened his mouth. "Didn't Johnny tell you?"

"He told me. But I was only fifteen years old at the time, and we haven't talked about it since. I'd like to hear it from you."

He shrugged, straightened. "I was courting Fred Hackett's daughter and he didn't like it. He had plans for Esther that didn't include me. I used to meet her in town, so he sent one of his men in to teach me a lesson, a bully boy named Finlay. We had it out one night in a saloon, and ended up fighting in the alley. Finlay pulled a knife. We were right up against each other. I grabbed his wrist and twisted, and we fell. He fell on the knife."

"Johnny said it was self-defense, and that anyone else would have been cleared."

Croft shrugged again. "It was dark in that alley. And two or three of those that saw it happen swore I pulled the knife from Finlay's belt. The rest kept their mouths shut. It was all Hackett needed. By the time they picked a jury of farmers and ranchers that were mostly afraid of him, I was as good as behind bars."

"Fred Hackett died three years ago, you know." Croft nodded. "And Carl Mason, the lawyer that defended you, married Esther," she said.

"He did his best for me," Croft said.

The hostler drove a buggy with a fringed top around front, and Jim Croft helped Emma to the seat. "We'll go down by the river, where it's cool."

As they drove away from the stable, she started to speak. Then she gasped and gripped his arm. "Why, there's Charlie Yount and Red Barker."

Croft's eyes toughened as he looked ahead and saw two riders coming toward them at a walk. "Yount was Hackett's foreman," he said grimly.

"He still runs Spade."

As the riders approached, Croft saw that their horses were worn, streaked with froth and alkali dust. Yount pulled rein. He grinned at Emma and touched his hat. "Well, this is a surprise."

Emma said coldly, "Is it?"

Yount's grin cracked the dust that stained his lean cheeks. He was a broad-shouldered, thin-shanked man in his late thirties, and had been a Spade rider since Croft could remember.

The other was a stranger to Croft. A huge man with thick shoulders and a red, beard-stubbled face, he sat slouched in the saddle,

broad hands idle on the pommel, his expression indifferent.

Yount glanced at Croft and his grin spread. "Well, so they finally let you out, eh?"

Croft looked at him and did not answer. Neither man offered to shake hands.

Yount said casually, "What've you got in mind now that you're free to travel?"

"Nothing that'd interest you," Croft said. And then, curtly, "Clear the road!"

Yount's eyes narrowed in his dust-caked face. He took his time turning his horse. Croft put the team into motion, and Emma said angrily, "I'll bet they followed me here."

CROFT said nothing. He had thought a few times of going back home, if only to face men like Yount, men who had betrayed him. But now it no longer mattered, and there was nothing to go back to.

Home meant family and friends, and Croft felt he possessed neither. But that wasn't being fair, he told himself; Johnny and two or three others had spoken up for him at the trial. And Johnny had taken over his small ranch in Rimrock Valley. Five years had been ample time for him to pay off the place, and right now the money was on deposit in the Yuma bank.

The rest was a closed chapter, Croft thought. He was going to have a look at the Pacific Ocean. They had carved five years out of his young life and he had a lot of catching up to do.

He drove past a cluttered wharf and took the wagon road south. Below them the muddy Colorado ran sluggishly between banks that were green with reeds and wild grasses. Croft reined up and looked north, where he was just able to see the stark walls of the Territorial prison on the river's edge. It was hard for him to believe that he was sitting here now, a free man, with a lovely girl at his side.

She followed his gaze. "That's the place, isn't it? Was it—hard to bear?"

He remembered ankle and wrist chains clanking, shotgun guards with short tempers, foul meals and hours under the hot and yellow sun with a sledge hammer. "A man can get used to anything," he said shortly. He lit a cigar. "You said Johnny needed me. Why me? He shouldn't have any trouble hiring men."

"That's just it—he can't. It all started about a year ago, when a stranger offered to buy the ranch. Johnny refused and the man doubled his offer."

"Then Johnny should have sold. He wrote that he still faces a water problem, and he always will. My father must have dug a dozen test wells in his time; I dug a few more after he died. It's a starvation spread and always will be. Johnny knows that."

"Then why should anyone offer double what the ranch is worth? And why does every man we hire quit after a few days?"

"Is that what's been happening?"

"The last man we hired was beaten up and he refused to tell us the reason. He just collected his wages and left."

Croft shrugged indifferently. "Those things happen."

"You don't care," she said bluntly. "You probably feel sorry for yourself, so you sit in that saloon drinking and gambling. Johnny has been your friend, and now that he needs you—"

"Did he send you?"

"No! All I did was leave him a note so he wouldn't be worried."

Croft couldn't help but smile. "I think you're taking this too seriously. My advice would be for Johnny to take this man's offer and start up somewhere else."

She gave him a cold look. "Is that all you have to say?"

"What else is there?" He pointed across the river. "That's where I'm heading—California. San Francisco, most likely. Tell Johnny I'll keep in touch with him."

She said acidly, "Is it that you're afraid to face Esther?"

He gave her a hard look and said, "No," thinking of Esther's blond beauty, feeling a sudden sickness in the pit of his stomach.

Emma's eyes softened. "Were you very much in love with her?"

"Yes," he said.

"I'm sorry."

He said brutally, "You needn't be. It was that father of hers. He never gave a damn

for anyone except himself. It was always what he wanted, never what Esther and I might want."

"I know he was disliked."

"He was a selfish, arrogant man who thought he was God, and a man either bowed to him or went under. He could never buffalo my father, which is one reason he hated me." He stopped abruptly, suddenly annoyed with this girl for bringing it all back. "I'll take you back to the hotel," he said.

SHE SIGHED. "I came here hoping—well, there's no use talking about that now." She took a shaky breath. "It's just that one man can't fight Spade."

"You think Carl Mason is back of this trouble?"

"Not Carl so much—it's that Charlie Yount. He's the one that really runs Spade." She added bitterly, "Never mind, just hurry. I want to be in time to catch the one o'clock stage."

"I'm sorry your trip was wasted."

"Don't be. I didn't come here to beg."

They spoke little after this, and he saw her off on the stage with a sense of relief and aggravation. He ate a big meal at the hotel

and returned to the saloon, but restlessness drove him outside again, and he went to the livery stable where he rented a horse. It was getting on in the afternoon when he rode out of town and went at a steady lope along the river's bluff.

He had taken this ride daily since his release from prison, for the heady feeling of being separated from the earth by a running horse accentuated his sense of freedom. But today that feeling was missing. He kept wondering what Yount and Red Barker were doing in Yuma, over two hundred miles south of their home range. Had they followed Emma down here for a reason?

On impulse, he put his mount down the sandy bluff, then undressed and went for a swim. Restlessness still gripped him as he dried in the sun and put his clothes back on. He was walking toward his horse when he heard hoof sound. Looking up, he saw Yount and Red Barker gazing down at him. Yount said something, and then both men spurred their horses to come in between Croft and his mount.

They'd cleaned up and shaved, Croft noticed, and their horses had been rubbed down. Then Yount spoke, his voice silky. "Well, jailbird, what've you got to say since your talk with the Stanton girl? Have you made up your mind about your future?"

This was the Yount Croft remembered, and his face became rigid as a mask. A coldness of rage and resentment stirred in his eyes.

"You ought to be sitting pretty, what with Stanton buying that worthless graze of yours," Yount went on. "Besides, an ex-convict is always better off moving where he isn't known. Isn't that right?"

Croft said in a toneless voice, "Did you come here to tell me this? Is that why you followed Miss Stanton here?"

Yount grinned. "It's just that we wouldn't like to see you come back and get in trouble again, and that could happen easy to a man with a record. You follow me?" Croft said nothing, and Yount spat. "Hell, they took all the vinegar out of him," he said disgustedly. "Take him just the same, Red. There's nothing like a good going over to help a man make up his mind."

Red gave a short laugh and started to heave his bulk out of the saddle. Croft, who had guessed what was coming, made as though to jump at him. Then he changed direction in midstride, took a startled Yount by the belt, and jerked him clear of his horse. Still gripping the belt, Croft swung the Spade foreman bodily through the air and slammed him up against Red. The two men went down in a tangle of arms and legs and curses.

CROFT stepped in as Yount pulled his gun and fired, a hasty shot that missed its mark. Croft kicked the gun out of his hand, his eyes filled with cruel derision, then reached out and lifted Red's gun and tossed it aside. Yount swore and lunged at him, and Croft slapped him in the face with all the power of his arm and shoulder. It drove Yount to his knees, where he stayed, his head hanging, blood oozing from his nose and mouth.

Red Barker had whirled on hands and knees as Croft snatched his gun, and now he crouched and sprang like a great bear. Croft braced himself and met that charge with one smashing blow that dropped Red as though he had been axed.

Croft picked up the guns. "Yount," he said, "when it comes man to man you can take a back seat. You're not home now, riding under Spade's protection." Yount lifted his head, a dazed look in his eyes. He glanced at Red, then watched Croft take the guns to a flat boulder that wedged up out of the sand.

Holding the butt of one of the guns steady on the edge of the boulder, Croft took hold of the barrel and bent it slowly away from the frame. There was a ripping sound as his coat tore at the shoulder. Croft tossed the wrecked gun aside and bent the other one out of shape.

"That's what comes from swinging a ten-pound sledge hammer for five years, Yount. Did you ever think of that?"

Then Croft took their rifles from the saddle scabbards, and he broke stocks and sights forever with two shattering blows. Yount growled something and started to rise, and Croft walked over to him.

"Don't get up or I'm liable to kill you,"

he said, in a softly dangerous voice. Yount sank back to his knees, his bloody face watchful. "You let them railroad me," Croft went on. "You knew Hackett sent Finlay after me, and that his death was an accident. Yet when they called you to the stand you told the jury that I pulled the knife. Yount, you'd better be damned glad that I'm letting you live. There are some in that prison just waiting for the day they get out so they can kill men like you."

He turned to his horse and mounted, and Yount said hoarsely, "This doesn't change anything, jailbird." He spat a stream of blood. "You might be able to bend guns, but you can't stop a bullet with your hands. Just remember that, in case you got any ideas of going back where you're not wanted."

Croft studied him for a contemptuous moment. Then he gave a harsh sigh. "Yount, you should have taken your licking and kept your mouth shut. For your information, I saw no reason for going back. But now you've made it possible for me." He touched his horse with a spur and loped away.

HE RODE through the darknes on the black gelding he had purchased on leaving the stage at Mexican Hat, twenty miles south of Sage, his home town. Now that he was approaching his destination, he sensed a reluctance at having come at all. But, beyond this, he kept wondering why Yount had gone to so much trouble to keep him from coming back. Did it have something to do with Johnny's problem in Rimrock Valley?

It was doubtful. For this was at once a rich and a worthless land. Water made the difference. Hackett's domain, with its natural springs, had always been green with grama and sacaton grass, a range of plenty; while Rimrock Valley, on Spade's southern border, consisted of sage and sand and scanty graze, of muddy water holes that were only full after cloudbursts or heavy rains, most of which fell in the high country.

Still, the valley was home, where he had been born, and suddenly he felt the pull of his roots and knew a moment of nostalgia. Up ahead he saw a few winking lights below the escarpment that loomed beyond the town, and he thought of how different his life would have been had he married Esther and raised a family. Then he realized how ridiculous it was to think this way, and evoked the picture of a slender, delicately-made face. "Emma," he murmured. "Nice name, Emma." He grinned at himself in the darkness.

He figured it to be long past midnight when he trotted down Grand Street and looked at the familiar outlines of false fronts. Most of the buildings were in darkness. Reaching Elk, he looked right and saw three or four horses racked up in front of Sam Shaw's saloon, where he'd had his fight with Finlay. Sam had been one of those that'd stood up for him at his trial, and on impulse he turned that way.

The saloon was deserted except for three men playing poker at a corner table. The big man wiping glasses behind the bar had a careless look to him, and sported a brace of sweeping mustaches. He glanced up as Croft entered, then stared, eyes squinting, and put glass and towel carefully on the bar.

"Jim Croft?" he said. And then, grinning widely, "Damned if it isn't!" He offered his big hand and Croft shook it, grinning himself.

"How've you been, Sam?"

"Can't complain." Shaw reached under the counter for a bottle and filled two glasses. "You're lookjng good, boy. Here's to you."

Croft wasn't sure whether it was Sam's greeting or the whisky that suddenly warmed him. He leaned his elbows on the bar. "Did Yount and Barker come through this afternoon?"

Sam Shaw glanced at the poker players. "Heard they're out of town."

Croft nudged his head at the players. "Spade?"

Shaw made a face. "Spade doesn't drink here, Jim. Not since—" He shrugged. "I reckon you know."

Croft said wryly, "So that was your reward. What's Spade up to, Sam?"

"I know what they're just about out of, and that's water." Shaw refilled their glasses. "Their springs've been drying up little by little, and Yount's been eyeing neighboring graze. He's moved a flock of dry farmers

that'd settled down below your place, and he's had trouble with old Wyatt, at Sulphur Creek."

"That's always been a dry bed. What would Spade be wanting down there?"

"Grabbing at straws, I reckon. He's up against a wall, Jim. Hasn't half enough water and grass for his cows."

"His cows, Sam? Who owns Spade—Carl and Esther Mason, or Charlie Yount?"

"Folks've been talking Spade and thinking Yount ever since Hackett died," Shaw said. "I reckon that's because he's been there so long. But I understand Carl inherited the ranch. Seems like Hackett held to the idea that no woman had a right to own property."

CROFT said, "Sounds like him, all right. But doesn't Carl take a hand in running Spade?"

"Carl?" Shaw said, and made a sound of disgust. "About all he takes a hand in is poker games and plenty of drinking. He spends half his time in the hotel card room. If he doesn't hit that bottle too hard he goes back to the ranch. Otherwise he sleeps it off in town and starts up again next day. Come to think of it, he pulled out just a few minutes before you got in." Shaw snorted. "No, when you mean Spade, you might as well have Yount in mind."

"A hell of a note," Croft said, and picked up his drink. Just then the door opened and heavy footsteps paced slowly across the floor. Sam made a warning sound with his lips. Croft turned his head, to find a man watching him. He was a husky fellow with a broad chest and thick arms. His face was wide, the chin squared off like a spade; he had a short, fleshy nose, a thick-lipped, sneering mouth, and his eyes were a cold, baleful blue. Lamplight reflected dully from the star pinned to his vest.

The fellow leaned an elbow on the bar, glanced briefly at Shaw and said, "Who's he?"

Before Shaw could answer, Croft slammed his glass on the scarred mahogany. He said harshly, "Ask me, don't ask Sam."

The man straightened slowly. "All right," he said, "I'm asking you."

"The name is Croft. Jim Croft."

"Heard about you. Been doing time, is that right?"

"That's right," Croft said.

"Now I want to make it clear how you stand around here," the other said. "I'm Hank Granger, deputy sheriff for this end of the county. As long as you're around here, you watch yourself, see? I won't stand for an ex-con making things tough for me. Start anything and you go back where you came from, and pronto."

Croft's eyes were chipped glass. Muscles rippled beneath his skin, but he said nothing. Granger regarded him a moment longer, spat in the general direction of the nearest spittoon, then turned on his heel and walked out, slamming the door shut behind him.

"That," Shaw said softly, "was the law. And to my recollection that's the second time he's been in here."

Croft took a ragged breath. "What ever happened to Ben Disk? He was a fair deputy."

"The word is that Ben was pushed out to make room for Granger," Shaw said disgustedly. "Yount supposedly went to the county seat and got him the job. Granger used to ride for Spade. And Ben's on his uppers—too old to ride and too proud to take work as a swamper. He comes in here of an evening."

"I might drop in to see him tomorrow night," Croft said. "Well, Sam, thanks for the drinks. I'll be getting along."

"Watch yourself," Shaw said, and Croft went out.

Riding out of town, he thought about Granger. Had the deputy heard about him from Yount? Sam had said it was only Granger's second visit to his saloon. Was it possible that Yount, guessing Croft would come to Sage, had telegraphed ahead to Granger? How else had the deputy learned he was in town? The possibility struck a note of alarm in Jim Croft; he knew how easily a man could be framed, especially a man with a record.

He was about two miles out of town when an odd sound drew his attention. Then, in the sooty darkness, he saw what appeared to be an empty buggy. The horse had stopped

and was snatching grass along the edge of the road. Croft rode up to the buggy and saw a figure sprawled on the seat.

He swung down, struck a match and cupped it against the light wind, then leaned over the figure. Carl Mason's face was red and puffed and covered with beard stubble. His mouth hung open and the sound of his breathing was audible. This was hardly the young, intense and struggling lawyer Croft remembered, and the sight of that untidy figure disgusted him. The man had passed out cold.

Croft flipped the match away, knowing what he would have to do. But he knew he was thinking mainly of Esther and that this was a chance to see her again. He tied his gelding to the back of the buggy, eased Mason to one side of the seat, and picked up the lines. An odd excitement gripped him. He wondered what he would say to her. It was still a six-mile drive to the Spade ranch house. Maybe, by the time they got there, he would know what to say to Esther Mason.

IT WAS when he turned the buggy up the long, winding lane leading to the house that a nagging thought was borne in on Croft. For a Spade puncher to take Mason home in this condition was one thing; but for him to face Esther with her drunken husband in tow was something else. It would only humiliate and embarrass her. Jim Croft sighed and pulled rein. Taking Mason by the shirt front, he slapped him briskly back and forth across the face.

At the third slap, Mason muttered something and raised a feeble arm in protest. "What the hell," he said thickly.

"Wake up, Carl!"

Mason shuddered and said, "Brrrrrrr." His eyes blinked open and he took a ragged breath. "Who are you?"

"It's Jim Croft. How you feel? Pretty tough?"

Mason put a hand out and stared at him, and he appeared to shrink back. "Jim?" he said, his voice alarmed. "How—did you get here?"

"I just hit town and was on my way to see Johnny. Then I saw the buggy, and here I am. You passed out cold, boy."

Mason swore softly. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, and cupped his face in his hands. Croft could feel him shaking as he took one ragged breath after another.

"If you can make it all right, I'll be going," Croft said gently.

"Come along," Mason mumbled through his fingers.

"Too late, Carl. Esther'll be asleep. No need bothering her."

Mason laughed shakily, a little bitterly perhaps. "She'll be up. She always waits up for me." He laughed again. "You don't know my loving wife very well, do you, Croft?" He rubbed his face vigorously. "Come on, let's go," he said in a low voice. He added sulkily, "It'll be all right. She'll be glad to see you."

Puzzled, and more than a little doubtful, Croft drove on. In a few minutes the lane opened on the yard and the scattered buildings of Spade.

A man came out of the darkness and said wearily, "Carl?" and Carl Mason said, "Yeah," and stumbled out of the buggy. He stood there for a little while and retched, his hands gripping the seat railing.

The other came around to Croft's side and looked at him in the darkness, a hard, searching look. Croft said, "Wait," and untied his black gelding. The other got in the buggy and drove it toward the barn, and Croft guessed this to be one of his nightly chores.

Carl Mason stood spraddle-legged and put his hands on his knees. "You go on," he said thickly. "I'll be right in."

Croft turned somewhat reluctantly to the long, low adobe house, seeing lamplight in the kitchen window. He tied his horse by the back door, hearing Mason's strangled cough. He stood there a moment with a choked feeling in his throat, then crossed the back porch and opened the kitchen door.

She was standing at the stove, and he saw that she had coffee boiling. She wore a wrap of some kind and her long blond hair was combed out and braided. "Carl?" she said cheerfully. "Coffee's ready, honey."

"It's me, Esther," said Croft, wishing now he hadn't come.

She turned sharply, one hand at her breast,

her blue eyes staring in her pale face. "Jim!" she gasped.

"I met Carl on the road, and he insisted I come along. He'll be right in, Esther."

"Jim," she said shakily, and stepped toward him. "You gave me quite a—shock."

"I shouldn't have come at this time of night."

SHE WAS as lovely as he remembered her, yet somehow different, more mature perhaps, and he noticed faint worry lines around her eyes that had not been there before. But still the sight of her turned his heart and thickened the lump in his throat.

"You say you met Carl on the road?" she asked anxiously.

Croft explained what had happened, leaving out the fact that Mason had passed out. But before he could finish telling her Mason stumbled inside and said harshly, "Why don't you tell her the truth? Why don't you tell her you found me passed out in the buggy?"

Esther said with quick concern, "It's all right, honey."

"Is it?" Carl Mason drew himself up and then leaned against the wall. "Well, I don't think it's all right," he said harshly. He pushed away from the wall and walked carefully across the room, where he turned. "You think it's all right?" he asked Croft in that same harsh tone. "A Harvard graduate, thank you. Coming home drunk like a damn saddle tramp." He half shouted, "You think that's all right?" He glared at Croft out of wet eyes, his face red and blotched, his mouth trembling.

"Have some coffee, honey," Esther said soothingly. "You sit down, now, and have some coffee."

"Don't want coffee," Mason said sullenly. He took a shaky breath. "Sorry," he mumbled, looking at Esther. "Awful sorry." He turned to Croft. "Sorry, Jim. Damn sorry about it." He turned and left the room on shaky legs.

Croft cleared his throat and ran the brim of his hat around and around in his fingers. He glanced away from the desperately unhappy expression on Esther's face. Damn that Carl! Didn't he appreciate what he had? Croft wanted suddenly to take her in his arms, to comfort her. They had meant so much to each other. And if Carl Mason'd been a frequent caller at the house, it was because her father had wanted it that way. Hackett had wanted a lawyer for a son-in-law, and as usual he'd had his way.

Esther sank down at the table. "Jim, I'm glad you're back. I feel that now there's someone I can talk to."

"What about, Esther?"

She gave him a helpless look. "I really don't know." She pressed her fingers against

her temples and squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't know why he gets this way. He never used to drink. You remember what a struggle he had to get ahead? And yet how eager—" She broke off and sighed. "Don't let's talk now. Can you come here Friday night about nine? That's when Yount always takes the

crew into town the way—Dad used to."

"I'll be here," Croft said.

She came to him and put her hands on his shoulders, and Croft's heart turned over. He caught his breath as a slow smile broke out on her lovely face.

"You're a pretty wonderful man, Jim," she said softly. "After what happened, you

There were several shots as he ran hard away from the house

certainly had the right never to speak to any of us again. Yet here you are." She pressed her cheek against his, and he held her a moment. "Good night, Jim," she whispered.

He went out, all the old longings surging violently through him. And he wasn't at all sorry now that he had come back.

IT WAS later than he had thought. By the time he crossed the bench south and dropped down to follow the dry wash that was called Sulphur Creek, the first daylight lifted in the east, followed by the blinding ball of the sun.

During those first minutes of ruddy light and gaunt shadows, Croft was again reminded that this was a land of contrasts. It was a broken land, scarred by arroyos and canyons, pitted by small valleys and basins. Beyond rose the mountains, crimson now under the early sun. It was a land of piñon and juniper, of mesquite and creosote brush, where colors constantly changed with the angle of the sun, and distances were deceptive.

Jim Croft crossed the wash above Wyatt's place and climbed a slope that curled upward as though it were trying to reach the sky. Horse and rider cast long shadows westward. He topped the ridge finally and reined in to look down on Rimrock Valley, his gaze going at once to his former holdings at the foot of the opposite slope.

The house, barn and sheds were cigar-box-sized, the corral fences match sticks. Running west, the valley was perhaps three miles in length, less than half as wide. Croft found the switchback trail and started down, seeing here and there the mounds of weed-covered earth where test wells had been dug without success. On the valley floor he passed a scatter of gaunt and listless steers. He rode out of his way to check a water hole, and found a dozen or so cattle standing knee-deep in liquid mud. He took an exasperated breath. If Johnny'd been offered double the value for the place, he was a fool for not having sold.

Emma ran from the house as he rode up.

"Jim!" she cried. "Jim, you came after all!" Her eyes danced and she looked as delighted as a child getting an unexpected gift. Croft swung down and grinned at her.

"This is just a different route to California, that's all."

"Oh, fiddlesticks," she said, laughing. "Will Johnny be surprised! He was awfully angry with me when I came home yesterday." She turned grave. Anyhow, whether you know it or not, you helped make up his mind. I told him what you'd said about selling out and he decided you were right. So he sent a telegram to this man—his name is George Ingles—in Flagstaff, asking him to come here and talk business. If he makes the same offer he made before Johnny's going to accept it."

"That seems the wisest move," Croft said slowly.

"You don't sound as sure of yourself as you did in Yuma." Emma said, watching him curiously. "Has something happened to change your mind?"

Croft chuckled. "Only that I've been riding most of the night, and that I could eat this gelding. Where's Johnny?"

He's out hauling water. It's one of his before-daylight chores. You put your horse up, and I'll fry you a dozen eggs and a pound of bacon."

She laughed and ran back to the house like a schoolgirl.

After he had fed and watered the gelding and given the animal a brisk rubdown, Jim Croft sauntered over to the other corral and looked at a half-dozen fat steers.

Emma called from the back door, "Johnny's been corn-feeding them so he can sell them to the mines up around Finger Butte. Come on, Jim. Breakfast is ready."

Croft turned to the house. "How many head is he running now?"

"A few over four hundred. It used to be close to five hundred, but we've lost during the past year."

Croft frowned. "Rustlers?"

"We don't know. And Johnny can't be everywhere at once. He talked to the deputy in town, but that fellow's no help. Johnny thinks the Navajos have been making small raids."

"Has he notified the sheriff?"

"Sure. But he's a man that never leaves the county seat."

SHE SERVED breakfast. Croft had just finished the last of his coffee when a wagon ground up to the back door. Through the window Croft saw Johnny climb wearily down from the seat, and he saw the four slopping barrels in the bed of the wagon.

Johnny opened the door and scraped his feet on the stoop. "We'd better make this last until Ingles gets here, Sis," he said bitterly. "That swing up at the willows is drying up, too. Unless we get a rain—"

He broke off and stared with amazement as Croft rose and grinned at him.

"I'll be damned!" he exclaimed, wringing Croft's hand. "Emma said you weren't coming. Now isn't this something!"

Emma laughed with delight. "He surprised me, too."

"Well, this is fine." Johnny grinned. He was a broad, stocky man of Croft's age, with thick black hair and pleasantly blunt features. He wore faded jeans and a worn work shirt that had been mended at the elbows. His boots were battered and run down at the heels. Croft felt almost guilty, standing there in the whipcord trousers and shirt he'd bought himself in Mexican Hat.

Emma poured more coffee, and Johnny talked. There was an air of stony bitterness and defeat about the man. "I'm licked and I might as well admit it," he said finally. "I can't afford to feed corn to every cow on the place and haul water for 'em to boot. But I hate to sell out! I've learned to like the place, worthless or not. That's the hell of it."

"Are all your wells dry?"

"Every one except for that last one I dug below the bluff at the west end. And it only pumps a trickle. I threw barbed wire around it and have to water a dozen cows at a time, then wait a couple of days for the tank to fill up again."

"I hear Spade is in about the same fix."

Johnny grunted. "Damn near. But they can afford to weather it out, or drill. I can't." He paused, added bitterly, "If they don't move in on me before that. They're damn near all around us as it is. Drove the farmers out down below, and out of the Wind Hills, and their stock has been drifting on our graze, bad as it is. I must've told Yount a dozen times, but he's never done anything about it. It's getting so I would start packing a gun, only the place isn't worth a shooting."

"He could move his stock north," Croft said musingly, "but instead he seems to want Rimrock Valley. What do you know about this fellow George Ingles?"

"He's all right. Came from Wyoming and settled here for his health. Says he needs the dry climate. He's been living in Flagstaff. Been after me every now and then to sell out. He knows he offered more than the place is worth, but he likes it around here."

"The climate's free," Croft observed thoughtfully.

They went out then and wrestled the barrels from the wagon. Afterward Croft got his blankets and slept in the shade of the barn till late afternoon. When he got up he hunted a can of oil and spent an hour kneading the new-leather stiffness out of his recently-purchased shellbelt and holster. Then he stuck a board up out back between two rocks and practiced his draw.

The first crashing shot brought Emma running from the house. She watched in fascinated silence as Croft threw bullet after bullet at the board. At one time he had been pretty fast with a gun, but he realized now that he was rusty, that his coordination was way off. Swinging a sledge hammer did not improve a man's ability with a gun. And the new Colt felt awkward. But after a dozen tries his timing improved, and he was at least partially satisfied.

When he turned to Emma, she frowned and said in an odd voice, "I hope that was just for fun."

"That's just about it," Croft said. And he thought, I hope so myself.

EMMA had a plate of sandwiches ready for him. Johnny, she said, was out on the range. She shared the food and they ate in companionable silence, until Emma started telling of her girlhood in Ohio. "When our aunt died I quit school and came out here," she said gravely. "I always did want to come West, and I haven't been disappointed."

"I'll bet when you leave here there'll be

many a young fellow baying at the moon," Jim Croft teased.

She laughed, looking no older than sixteen, and it was a pleasure to watch her, even though it made Croft feel as old as the mountains.

"I'll admit I've had a few men callers," she said. "But lately—well, there's a sort of strain in the air. I don't know how to say it, but things aren't like they were."

"They never are," Croft said, and got to his feet. "Well, princess, I promised myself a visit to town this evening. Will you be all right until Johnny gets back?"

"Of course," she said. "I often stay alone. Anyhow, he'll be back early because we'll be going to town ourselves. Mr. Ingles sent a telegram from Mexican Hat saying he'll arrive on the evening stage. They delivered it while you were asleep." And then, a little anxiously, she added, "Jim, you are coming back, aren't you? Even if Johnny makes a deal it'll likely be a month or so before we actually move out."

Croft nodded absently. Then he looked up and said, "I wish it didn't have to be this way. Johnny doesn't really want to sell out."

"I know it," she said slowly.

"Well, tell him to keep his eyes open," he said, and started out. But she rose swiftly and stopped him before he reached the door.

"Jim—" she put a hand on his arm—"what're you trying to say?"

He looked down at her. No, she was no child; she was old enough to hear the truth. "I tangled with Yount and Red Barker in Yuma. They were going to make sure I didn't come back, which is one reason I changed my mind. Now why should Yount care whether I came back or not?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"Unless he thought I might pitch in and help Johnny," Croft went on. "He must know that Johnny's down to bedrock and ready to sell. He'd also know that I still have the money Johnny paid me for the place, because I sure couldn't spend it in prison. It's money that could keep Johnny going for at least another couple of years, and Yount evidently doesn't want to see that happen."

Emma sighed. "It doesn't make sense, does it? I mean, the place is really not even worth fighting over. What would you suggest, Jim?"

"That Johnny look further into this Mr. Ingles's offer before he turns over his deed."

She stared at him. "You mean that Mr. Ingles—"

"Could be a dummy," Croft said. "It wouldn't be the first time a man got what he wanted by having another man front for him."

"Then that means Carl Mason is involved."

Croft made a gesture of doubt. "Not necessarily. Yount could be doing this on his own, and he must have enough money saved to swing the deal."

"I'll tell Johnny what you said."

"I could be barking up the wrong tree," Croft said, "but there's nothing like making sure." He put a hand on her shoulder. "So long, princess. Maybe I'll see you in town."

"I hope so," she said. "So long, Jim."

BY THE time he reached town it was dark. He racked his horse in front of Sam Shaw's saloon and went inside. Though it was far from crowded, a number of customers lined the bar and three or four poker games were in session.

But for the most part it was a taciturn crowd, Croft noticed; the lively good humor of men relaxing over a drink was missing. He recognized a few faces, farmers for the most part, and two or three small ranch owners. His entrance caused a little stir. Eyes fastened on him and slid away; voices lowered or became silent. He met the gaze of a rancher named Winder and nodded, and Winder dipped his head curtly and wheeled away as though he had urgent business somewhere else.

It nettled Croft, though he knew it was to be expected. Some of these men he'd known most of his life, but they would be wondering why he'd returned and where he stood, and it would take them time to thaw out. Even so, they'd never forget; it would always be, "That's Jim Croft. He killed a man with a knife. Served five years at Yuma."

Well, he needn't stay. And as long as he remained he could stand outside the fence

and look on. That was one thing a man learned in prison: look on and keep your mouth shut, stay out of trouble.

He scouted the room for Ben Disk, but did not spot the old lawman at once. Shaw called him from the bar. "Ben should be in directly, Jim. Saw him a while ago and told him, and he said he'd be back." Shaw filled two glasses, leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Yount and Red got in this afternoon looking sour as grapes, so they tell me. Stayed an hour and headed for the ranch. Granger was in again, too, asking about you. Wanted to know if you were planning to stay. I told him I didn't know and to ask you."

"Thanks, Sam."

"There's something afoot, Jim. If I were you I'd watch myself. And if you're gonna drink do it in here, where you have at least a few friends."

Croft smiled thinly. "You sure they're my friends, Sam?"

"You might be surprised, son," Shaw said, nodding his head.

"Maybe," Croft said shortly. "What time does the stage pull in, Sam?"

Shaw took a heavy silver turnip from his pocket and looked at it. "About five, ten minutes."

"Tell Ben I'll be back," Croft said, and went out.

The hotel was a two-story structure of clapboard. It was painted brown, with a wide veranda, and gimcracks around the rails and below the eaves. Croft stood on the steps for a little while, smoking a cigar, but he finally flipped it away and wheeled inside. He crossed the lobby to the bar, where an inner door led to the card room. It was a medium-sized room, windowless, with three poker tables covered with green felt, and a lamp with a tin reflector above each table. Thick layers of smoke drifted sluggishly in the lamplight.

There was only one game going. The dealer looked up from under his eyeshade and gave Croft a quick scrutiny before he nodded. Carl Mason, his hat on the back of his head, fingered his cards and made a bet. Croft stood behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Hello, Carl," he murmured.

Mason jerked as though a branding iron had burned him. His head shot up and around, and his face cracked in a sickly grin. He had shaved and seemed sober, but Croft couldn't help noticing the near-frightened expression in his eyes and the way his hands trembled.

"Jim," Mason said, "how've you been?" He took a shaky breath and managed a half-hearted laugh. "Get any sleep last night?"

"Slept some today."

He watched them play the hand out and was turning to leave when Granger entered. The deputy gave him a hard look, glanced quickly at Mason, and put his back against the wall. Croft went out on the veranda, thinking, there's something here I don't get.

The stage didn't keep him waiting long. There was a high yell; and then he saw the six-horse team and the old Concord coach, with dust flying as the driver applied the brakes.

Two men and a woman got out. One was obviously a drummer, for he helped the driver unload a huge sample case from the roof of the coach. The other man came directly up the steps, a small, energetic fellow in a dark suit of Eastern cut. He wore glasses and carried a leather satchel. Croft looked through the door as the man opened it, and saw Granger standing by the bar entrance. That doesn't mean anything, he thought. Why make up mysteries?

Annoyed with himself, yet puzzled, he wondered if he should wait and sit in while Johnny talked to Ingles. Then he shook his head and went down the steps. This was Johnny's business, and he knew enough to handle it right.

JIM CROFT found Ben Disk leaning on the end of Shaw's bar, a whisky in his hand. They greeted each other with pleasure. Disk was past fifty, and had been a heavy man when Croft had known him. But sickness and worry had melted his flesh, so that now he had a bony look to him. The skin of his face sagged and was sallow and heavily lined, his hair was white, his eyes the dull and watery blue of an old man's.

He'd been a popular law officer in his time.

And though he'd been the one to arrest Jim Croft, he'd only done so after Fred Hackett had signed the complaint. He spoke of it now.

"Doesn't seem like it happened five years ago." He grinned sourly, called for an extra glass, and poured Croft a drink from his bottle. "Seems more like ten."

"I hear they pushed you out, Ben. What happened?"

Disk shrugged a resigned shoulder. "Said I was getting too old to handle the job, and maybe they were right."

"Was Yount back of it?"

"He had a hand in it, I reckon. But Mason pulled the strings, much as I hate to say it. And how I used to help that boy, too! I saw what a tough time he was having making ends meet, and every time I ran into something that looked like it might end up in court I'd recommend him as lawyer. I threw more than one case his way, and he seemed to appreciate it. Then, by God, he turns on me."

"What'd he do?"

"Went to the county seat and talked to old Judge Dwyer. The judge used to think a lot of him, on account of they both went to that Harvard school. Anyhow, I got word the sheriff—that was Dick Cronin—wanted to see me, and he told me there's been complaints and that I was through. Next day they sent Granger out." He chuckled grimly. "A Spade man. Old Hackett would've liked that. We never did get along, you remember, because I was always on his neck when he pushed the little fellers around. This Granger," he said, and snorted, "only acts when there's something Spade wants done."

"Why should Spade want to move on Rimrock Valley, would you know?"

Ben Disk shook his head. "I dunno. It's got a lot of folks puzzled. So has the way Mason's been acting. That boy hasn't practiced—now let me see, I don't reckon he's handled a case to speak of since he defended you. What a waste! He had the making of a fine lawyer."

It was a puzzle all right, Croft thought. He remembered the alarm in Carl Mason when the man had recognized him last night, and later the bitter anger directed against himself, a mixture of self-pity and disgust.

Fear bred drunkenness, Croft thought. But what did Carl Mason have to fear? He was better off now than he had been as a struggling young lawyer. What was it that had broken his spirit?

Croft asked Ben if he'd ever heard of Ingles, but the old lawman said no. He spoke of the old days, finally pushed away from the bar.

"Got to get my sleep," he said. "I tire easily these days. But I'll be seeing you, Jim."

They shook hands, and Ben Disk went out. As Croft turned to beckon Shaw, there was a commotion to his left. Someone muttered a curse and drifted away, followed by two or three others. This left a cleared space at the bar, into which moved a tall, thin fellow with a gaunt, pock-marked face.

Croft gave him a bare glance and looked again for Shaw, who was busy out front.

THEN he noticed the thin fellow looking past the next man's shoulder at him, as though he meant to settle a long overdue feud between them.

Croft frowned and picked up his drink, certain he was mistaken, for he had never seen this fellow before in his life. But he continued to feel the other's narrow gaze on him.

The man between, as though suddenly aware of a taut silence, glanced quickly from the thin man to Croft, gulped his drink, and walked away.

A little tension gripped that end of the room as others noticed the unnatural silence. The thin man edged forward until he was less than five feet from Jim Croft, who was watching him now in the bar mirror. Nerves twanged his flesh. The fellow appeared sober, and had all the earmarks of a gunfighter. In that first glance Croft hadn't missed the fellow's hand near the worn grip of a low-slung Colt. This is it and no mistake, Croft thought.

He took a sip from the glass and put it down near the edge of the bar. The thin man, his voice toneless, his lips scarcely moving, said, "You'd better take the rest of it, buster. You're liable to need it."

"You speaking to me?"

"Buster," the man said, edging forward, "I've been waiting a long time for this. Five long years. Or maybe you don't remember Finlay?"

"The name's familiar."

"He was my best friend, buster."

Whether the man was lying or not made little difference. He had come here to kill, and he looked like an old hand at the business. It meant he was fast on the draw and would attempt to goad Croft into going for his gun, for otherwise it would be murder.

The thoughts were Croft's. And he knew he would have to trick the fellow into drawing first. It was a chance, but he would have to take it. Better to die here, now, he thought, than hang, or spend the rest of my life in Yuma.

A coldness gripped him, a sense of fatalism. He turned, both hands on the bar, and droned softly and viciously, "If you were Finlay's friend, then you're the same breed of skunk."

The man's eyes flickered with evil cruelty. He dipped a shoulder slightly, his mouth stiff, and Croft knew the fellow hadn't expected this. He turned a little more and his left hand cupped the glass.

"A skunk," he repeated. "Mister, I can smell you from here."

The man crouched over a little and his breath hissed faintly. "Buster," he said, "you're asking for it."

Croft yawned deliberately. Then his whole body exploded at once as he flung the whisky into the man's face and said sharply, "Sorry, that one slipped!"

The fellow staggered back a step as the whisky found its mark, and all the muscles of his face squeezed together. And yet, even as he moved, the gun appeared to leap into his hand. His shot roared in the stunned silence, and the slug ripped slantwise into the bar near Croft's waist. The reek of powder smoke assailed Croft's nostrils as the man moved to fire again, but Croft hacked down at the barrel as he swept his own gun clear of leather. The Colt bucked in his hand once, then again, and he heard the solid thuds as the bullets tore through the man.

He fired a third time as the fellow sagged and slumped to the floor, the crash of those shots still ringing in his ears. Then there was a frozen silence that broke as men edged forward. The next second there came a harsh shout near the door. Granger, a tight grin on his face, bulled his way through the crowd, flinging men aside with short thrusts of his arms. Then Granger looked at the body, and Croft saw the grin vanish and utter disbelief take its place.

The deputy raised his eyes slowly and looked at Croft, and his face toughened. "I warned you about getting in trouble," he said heavily. "Put your gun on the bar, Croft. You're coming with me."

"Hold it!" Sam Shaw said. He heaved himself up on his bar, swung his legs across, and moved to stand by Croft. "This fellow," he said, pointing down at the dead man, "shot first." He looked around and raised his voice. "How about it? I saw it and so did the rest of you." He paused, and there was a tense moment of silence. "Speak up, dammit!"

Winder edged forward out of the circle. "Sam's right," he said gruffly. "It was self-defense."

"It sure was," another man said, and then three or four others spoke up in Croft's defense. Granger looked around sullenly, his hands on his hips.

"I don't give a damn," he growled. "I'm locking him up."

"No you're not, Granger," Shaw said firmly. "There'll be an inquest tomorrow, and that'll be the end of it."

Granger glared at Shaw, then at Croft. Then he turned and said harshly, "Some of you carry him down to the funeral parlor. The rest of you clear out. Haven't you ever seen a dead man before?"

JIM CROFT sat with Johnny and Emma in his hotel room. They had decided to spend the night in town. Johnny paced angrily back and forth.

"This is the damnedest situation I ever heard of," he said. "If he were Finlay's friend, and knew when you were getting out, why didn't he make his try at Yuma? How'd he know to come here to do it?"

"I've been wondering the same thing," Croft said.

Emma said softly and shakily, "Jim, if I'd known this was going to happen I'd never have gone to Yuma to see you."

"Don't worry about it, princess," Croft said. "I'm glad now you did look me up." He turned to Johnny. "Did you talk to Ingles?"

"Yeah, but not for long."

"When'd you get here?"

"About ten minutes after the stage pulled in. Emma told me what you'd said, and I got to thinking I'd better look before I jump. So I told him right off I was sorry he'd made the trip, because I meant to hang on for a while. He didn't say much, wasn't mad or anything like that, so Emma and I went to call on the Drews right outside of town. About a half hour later we heard about the shooting and came running."

Croft sighed and got up. "Well, we might as well get to bed. It could be pretty rough at that inquest tomorrow."

Emma followed him outside and closed the door. "Jim, you suspect this was planned, don't you?" she said. "You don't believe this man was Finlay's friend?"

"He could've been."

"I suppose so," she said slowly, watching him. Then, taking a tremulous breath, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him lightly on the mouth, then stepped back, her face flushed and uncertain. "We'll stick with you, Jim," she whispered, and turned swiftly, with a rustle of starched skirts, to her room along the hall.

Croft went to his own room, an odd, set smile on his face. He lighted the lamp and sat on the edge of the bed, pulling off his boots. His mind wavered between Emma and the inquest. With a wry smile he finally rose to unbutton his shirt. Just then there was a knock on the door. He hesitated a moment before crossing the room, his hand on the butt of his gun.

The knock was repeated. A voice said urgently, "Jim, are you in there?" It was Carl Mason.

Croft let him in. The lawyer stopped in the middle of the room and turned. "You did it, didn't you?" he said, grinning faintly.

Croft nodded slowly. He said nothing.

Carl Mason leaned against the bureau and crossed his arms, and for just a second he reminded Croft of the energetic lawyer he had once been.

"You threw the whisky in his face, of course," Mason said, "but that can be slurred over as an accident. The point is, he started the ruckus and fired first."

"Carl," said Croft, "are you trying to tell me I need a lawyer?"

A pleading expression showed nakedly in the lawyer's eyes and then was gone. He forced a laugh. "Not necessarily. But after I heard about it I thought I'd do what I could. So I got a list of names of fourteen men who will swear that you fired in self-defense."

"Who was the fellow, Carl? Have they found out?"

"No one seems to know. And he had no identification on him at all. Still, there's no doubt in my mind but what he was Finlay's friend."

Croft said softly, "Isn't there, Carl?"

The lawyer looked at him. Then he stared, and the blood drained slowly from his face so that it became haggard. It was as though Croft's question had made him aware of something he had not even considered.

"What—do you mean?" he asked shakily.

"Don't you know, Carl?"

"I—don't get you—" the lawyer began, and gazed at the floor. Croft crossed over and opened the door.

"Hold on a minute," Mason said hastily. "This list—"

"Never mind the list," Croft said.

The lawyer gave him a beseeching look and made an odd sound, a moan perhaps, then stumbled out of the room as though he had gone blind. Croft closed the door softly, thoughtfully. After a while he undressed and went to bed.

CROFT and Johnny herded the six fat steers up the first steep slope heading west out of the valley. The morning sun showed nakedly the rugged hills that stretched before them. Mesquite trees grew thick there,

and the earth had a reddish hue beneath the dark green blanket.

Johnny turned a grinning face and said, "Well, it wasn't so tough after all, was it?"

Croft gave a wry shake of his head. The inquest had lasted less than half an hour, and the jury cleared him without any trouble. Photographs had been taken of the dead man and would be distributed to the sheriffs of the surrounding counties. Meanwhile the corpse lay buried in an unmarked grave.

"Had me worried, just the same," Croft said.

"Don't blame you."

The two men jogged along behind the steers they were driving to the mine at Finger Butte.

They were in the hills when Johnny turned in the saddle and pointed north. "See that shack with the tin roof up there below that shoulder?"

"Yeah," Croft said, "but I don't remember it."

"It wasn't there when you left. Happened a little over three years ago. A couple of young mining engineers with a slim purse got to scouting around and thought they had something there. Gold." Johnny grinned. "They paid me a hundred dollars and talked me into signing an agreement where I was to get a fourth of anything that came out of their mine. They tunneled in at the base of that shoulder and dug their shaft down to about sixty feet, then tunneled out from there in two or three directions before they decided they'd made a mistake. Took damn near every cent they had, too."

"Five miles to go," Jim said. "We'll take it easy."

Quick excitement stirred in Croft. "Do you suppose—" he began, but Johnny laughed.

"I thought so more than once, so I had a fellow who really knows his stuff come down from Finger Butte and check those diggings. He said those two fellows just wasted their money, and should've known better."

An hour later they came upon a spring that trickled from beneath an overhang of rotting

limestone. Forty to fifty head of restless, bawling Spade cattle surrounded the spring, but there was no sign of riders.

"Here's where Yount drove the farmers out," Johnny said grimly, and pointed out the charred remains of several shacks on the flats beyond the spring. "Came one evening with ten riders and hardly gave 'em time to pack."

They moved on and reached Finger Butte by mid-afternoon, delivered the steers, and ate in the mine's cook shed. It was fully dark by the time they rode back past the limestone spring.

Where the trail traversed a slope, Croft raised his head sharply once and stopped his horse, thinking he had heard a swishing of brush up ahead. He sat motionless, listening hard, but all he heard was the moaning wind and the creaking of Johnny's saddle as Johnny turned to look at him.

"What's wrong?"

"I guess I'm jumpy."

"It's that wind," Johnny said. "Storm in the mountains. We just might get some rain in a day or two."

They rode stirrup to stirrup along the faint trail.

The black sky was studded with brilliant stars. Croft was looking at them when the shots came, shattering the stillness with their sharp cracks.

RIFLE fire, Croft thought automatically. He heard the whining sound of the slug that jerked the hat from his head. Then he heard a solid *whunk* and a harsh moan, and had a glimpse of Johnny sagging forward across the saddle horn.

Then he saw a lash of flame in the brush above and slightly behind them, and he swept his Colt clear and fired, then reined his black gelding savagely and raked the animal with a spur. The echo of his shot still hung all around him as he fired again where he'd seen the flash.

He pounded through waist-high mesquite, pulled rein and listened. There came to him the sound of running feet. Holstering the Colt, he pulled his Winchester from the scabbard, levered a shell into the chamber and gave chase. The slope steepened. Once again he stopped to listen, and then, silhouetted on the rim, he saw a rider and a riderless horse. The next second a running figure appeared. As the man flung himself into the empty saddle, Croft drew bead and fired, the shot drawing a howl of pain.

He fired again and went ahead at a run. But the crest of the slope was farther than he had thought. By the time he reached it he heard the rapid hammer of hoofs fade and die out.

Yount's men, he thought angrily—perhaps Yount himself. He remembered Johnny and turned back.

Johnny was still in the saddle, one hand gripping the horn, the other clamped against his chest. Croft looked at the wound with the aid of a match. The bullet had torn through the big muscle of Johnny's left arm and on through the flesh of his chest. He was bleeding badly and was in a state of shock from being hit with that heavy bullet.

Croft bandaged the wound as best he could with a bandanna. "Five miles to go," he said. "We'll take it easy."

Johnny ground his teeth. "I'll make it," he said. . . .

Croft hailed the house as they rode up, and Emma came to the door. "Find plenty of clean cloth and start some water boiling," he said. "Johnny's been hurt."

She gasped, stared at Johnny, then turned swiftly inside. Croft carried Johnny into the bedroom. He'd lost a lot of blood already, and the left side of his shirt and jeans were soaked with it. Croft found whisky in the cupboard and made him drink half a tumbler full. Then Emma, her face pale, cleansed the wounds and prepared to bandage them.

Croft said, "I'll hitch up the wagon and you can drive him into town to see the doc. And you'd better stay there with him tonight."

"Who was it, Jim?"

"I don't know," he said, and went out. By the time he drove the wagon around front Johnny was ready to be moved. They eased him down on the hay Croft had piled in the wagon bed, then covered him with blankets. He said he was feeling pretty good, but Croft knew it was the whisky talking.

"Go on, now," he told Emma. "I'll be in to see him tomorrow."

She said anxiously, "What are you going to do, Jim?"

"Hold the fort."

She said bitterly, "Oh, I wish we'd sold out. Then none of this would have happened."

"I reckon not."

"Well, it's not too late. If Mr. Ingles is still in town—"

"Is that what you want?" Croft interrupted. "To sell out? To run?"

She took a ragged breath. "You're hard, you don't care. Yesterday you killed a man, and now Johnny. . . . He's all I've got, don't you see?"

Her words, spoken so fiercely, jolted him. A sudden terrible sympathy swept through him, but he hardened himself against it. "I understand, princess," he said gently. "Now you'd better go before he loses more blood."

"Jim, I didn't mean—" she began, as though sensing that she'd hurt him, but he stopped her.

"Get moving," he said curtly, and waited until the wagon was out of hearing before mounting his horse and riding in the direction of Spade.

HE CAME up behind the ranch buildings, tied his horse in the brush, and moved slowly down the long slope that ended on a bank below which stood the low log bunkhouse.

Light shone through the two windows on this back side, and he noted light also in the house kitchen. He guessed Esther was waiting up for her husband. Then thoughts of Esther and Carl went out of his head as he sank to his heels on the edge of a bank that allowed him to look directly into the bunkhouse.

Five men were playing cards at a table near the stove. Another man lay sprawled on his bunk reading a paper. Croft saw this much before he moved to look through the second window. This was the back end of the bunkhouse. Yount sat in a rocking chair talking to someone Croft couldn't see, so he moved a little more until the man came in view. It was Red Barker. He sat on the edge of his bunk, stripped to the waist, his left arm in a sling, his shoulder swathed in bandages.

Croft grunted. So it was Red, he thought.

He straightened then, slid down the bank and came around the bunkhouse to the door. He opened it and stepped inside. One of the card players glanced up indifferently, then stiffened and said, "Hey!" the single explosive word drew everyone's attention.

Yount and Red Baker rose and came forward. Then they stopped. There was a moment of silence.

"Red," Jim Croft said finally, "if Johnny dies I'm coming back to kill you. And don't think for a minute I'm fooling."

Red started to speak, changed his mind, and looked at Yount as though for help.

Yount said, his voice softly vicious, "What does it take to pound sense into your head, Croft?"

"Stay out of Rimrock Valley, Yount. That's a warning, and the only one you'll get."

Tension flashed like sheet lightning between these two. "By God," Yount breathed, "now he's warning us."

"Yount, if you want it out now, strap your gun on," Croft said. The foreman's eyes flickered but he did not move. "What's the matter, kid?" Croft said. "Are you remembering what happened to your hired gunfighter last night?"

Yount still said nothing, but Croft saw that mention of the gunfighter had enraged the foreman, and he knew he had guessed right. The dead man had not been Finlay's friend; Yount had told him to use that angle as an excuse to face Jim Croft.

"So it didn't work," Croft said. "What's next on the program, Yount?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Yount growled. From the corner of his eye Croft saw Red lean over and reach for something in a bunk.

"Red," he said, "you'd better straighten up unless you want me to break your other arm for you."

Red straightened, a scowl around his mouth. So did the man who had been reading the newspaper. He dropped the paper and sat up, a lanky man with a hawk face and a mane of curly black hair. A wild grin stretched his mouth as he rose, the gun steady in his hand and pointed straight at Croft.

"What's wrong with you guys?" he said. "He isn't making me jump by a damn sight." He advanced on Croft, jammed the gun in his stomach, and slapped him a hard, stinging blow in the face. Then he drew back a step, still grinning wildly.

Yount said, "Watch it, Curly."

"I don't care who he killed," Curly said. "He isn't coming in my bunkhouse and order me around. Let's see how fast you are with that gun, mister. Go ahead, draw!" Croft did not move, and Curly laughed. "He sure blows a big wind, doesn't he? But I clipped his claws."

He laughed again, then suddenly broke it off at a sound from outside. "That's Mason," he said, and turned his head to Yount. "Who's gonna take care of the drunk's buggy?"

YOUNT gave a warning yell, but it was too late. Jim Croft had already grabbed Curly's gun wrist and had twisted the gun out of his hand. Still holding the wrist, Croft jerked Curly up on his toes, spun him around. There was a sharp snap and Curly screamed, his face suddenly waxen as he looked at his arm that bent oddly between the wrist and the elbow.

"You'd better learn to keep your eye on a man when you hold a gun on him, sonny," Croft breathed.

Curly moaned sharply, still looking at his arm. His eyes rolled until only the whites showed, then moaned again and pitched suddenly to the floor.

There came a thick shout from outside, then uncertain footsteps. Carl Mason appeared in the doorway and said, "Who's gonna put up—"

He broke off as he looked at Curly, and moistened his lips. Then he caught sight of Croft. He blinked, and steadied himself against the door jamb. "What's going on?"

"Go on, get out of here," Yount said.

He looked at Yount, then at Croft, and made an effort to pull himself together. "I asked what's going on."

"None of your business," Yount said impatiently. "Go on to the house."

Mason took a shuddering breath. "Get someone to put the buggy up, will you, Charlie?" he said, turned and walked unsteadily into the night. Croft backed to the door.

"Remember what I said, Yount."

As he went out he had a glimpse of Yount jumping for Curly's gun, and he scrambled up the bank, turned, and put a shot through the top of the door. Then he drew a bead through the window at the hanging lamp, fired, and heard a howl of rage above the shatter of glass as the bunkhouse was plunged in darkness.

He ran sideways, firing at intervals into the bunkhouse door, then reached his horse and threw himself in the saddle as returning fire peppered the slope.

They wouldn't try for him tonight, he thought. But after he reached the house he nevertheless stayed awake until dawn, his guns at his side. Then he slept for three hours, washed and shaved, had breakfast, and rode to town.

Johnny was asleep in Doc Hanby's spare bedroom when Croft arrived. Emma, who had spent the night with friends, said Johnny was in no danger but very weak from loss of blood.

"You look like you scarcely slept at all," she said, eyeing Croft curiously.

"Not too much," he admitted.

She looked away. "Jim, I'm sorry for what I said last night. I hadn't the right, after you went to all the trouble—"

"Save it, princess," he said, and smiled. "All that's happened has been good for me. You told me in Yuma that I likely felt sorry for myself, and I guess that was partially true, though I didn't know it. I didn't think I had a friend left in the world, but I learned I was wrong. It makes a difference."

She smiled herself. "Will you stay now?"

"At least until this business is settled. And you can count on what I said about Ingles being right, princess. If Yount had tried to buy Rimrock Valley Johnny might have become suspicious, so he had Ingles make the offer. But last night Johnny refused again to sell out. And Yount knew I was probably back of it, so he had that gunfighter ready to tackle me. He wants Rimrock Valley, and he wants it bad."

"But why?"

"I don't know, but I mean to find out,"

Croft said. "Take good care of Johnny, princess. I'll be back."

He stopped in to see Sam Shaw, who had nothing new to tell him. Afterward he returned to the ranch and saw the gray rise of smoke against the cloudy sky before he saw the buildings. But he knew the answer even as he spurred his horse into a hard run.

The house his father had built, the sheds and the barn—all was smouldering wreckage. And Johnny's horses were gone.

He looked around, tight-lipped with rage. What was the answer? Why did Carl Mason fear Yount? Maybe Esther knew. Croft thought. Tonight he would see her and find out.

But as he rode on up the valley he knew a moment of sickness and despair at the thought that he had been the cause of it all.

IN THE darkness he hunkered in the brush above Spade's buildings. The sound of voices and of men mounting their horses reached him. For a while, there, when a light rain had fallen late in the afternoon, he had thought the crew would stay at the ranch. But now he heard the men ride out of the yard.

He waited ten minutes and then approached the house, seeing light in the big front room. He rapped softly on the door. It opened almost immediately.

Esther said softly, "Jim?"

"Yes," he said, and stepped inside past her. When he looked at her he knew instinctively that she had been crying.

She led the way into the room and turned to face him, her expression anxious. "Jim, that shooting last night. Was that you?"

"Yes. Red Barker bushwhacked Johnny and me last night. Johnny got hit and I winged Red. I figured I'd better tell him where he stood."

"Oh, Jim," she said shakily, and came up against him. He put his arms around her, dizzy with old longings and not caring in that moment whether she was married or not.

She sighed and pushed away. "Carl's upstairs," she said. "He's drunk, Jim, but I finally got him to sleep. He's been drinking all day."

"Who else is on the place?"

"Red Barker. The boys took Curly to town last night."

"And today they burned down Johnny's ranch."

She stared at him. "Oh, no," she said faintly. "But they had Granger along. I guessed they were looking for you, but I didn't think they'd—"

"They did," Croft interrupted flatly. "And I heard the way Yount talked to Carl last night. What is it, Esther? What's the answer?"

"Jim, I don't know. After Dad died Carl took hold, but Yount put a stop to it. And there was nothing I could do because the ranch is in Carl's name. He started to drink, so I tried to talk him into opening his office again. But he wouldn't listen." She added in a low, fierce voice, "And he loves me, Jim. I know he does."

Croft looked at her. Something twisted in him. Suddenly it seemed he knew, and he was struck by a sense of loss. What a blind fool I am, he thought. Esther always waited up for Carl, coffee ready on the stove. There was no doubt about it: she loved her husband. And I fooled myself into thinking the door might still be open to her, Croft thought dismally.

He took a long breath. "Carl knows something. Hasn't he ever said anything to make you suspicious?"

She started to speak. Then something happened to her face as she stared past his shoulder. "Carl," she screamed, "don't!"

Croft whirled. He saw Carl at the foot of the stairs, eyes wild, hair and clothes disheveled, a gun in his hand. "So on top of everything else I have to take this, too," he said thickly. "Took everything else, but nobody's taking my wife."

"It's not true! You don't know what you're saying," Esther screamed. But Carl raised the gun in a wavering hand and fired.

Croft had stepped away from Esther, and he dived at Carl as the shot roared in the room. The lawyer, desperate with rage, fought like a wildcat. Esther's sobbing voice was on the edge of things.

Finally Croft wrestled Carl to his feet and

knocked the gun out of his hand. Esther screamed again and Croft, turning his head to say it was all right, saw Red Barker at the rear doorway, the coat across his shoulders drenched with rain, a tight grin on his wet face.

Braced in the doorway, he lifted a Colt and said hoarsely, "Step aside, Mason. I'll take care of him."

Croft thrust Mason from him and plunged to one side as he clawed for his gun. Red fired and missed, and then Croft's gun was clear of leather and Red's chest was a broad target. Jim Croft put two slugs into that target as Red fired again, then sagged slowly forward and spilled to the floor.

CROFT holstered his gun. He turned to Carl, who had sunk down on the stairs. "That's another one," he said harshly. "I'm taking him to the bunkhouse, and when I get back you'd better be ready to talk."

He picked Red up in his arms and carried him outside. A big wind blew, and the rain made a steady, driving sound. Cloudburst in the mountains, he thought automatically. It wouldn't last long. He laid Red on the bunkhouse floor and covered him with a blanket. Then he returned to the house feeling sad and disgusted, wishing he were out of it.

Carl still sat on the stairs, Esther beside him, her arm about his shoulder. He had his face in his hands and, when he looked up, Croft saw that he had been weeping.

"Jim, I'm sorry," he said. "I was drunk."

"It's all right, honey," Esther said softly.

Carl winced. "I heard what Jim said about Yount burning Johnny's place to the ground. Is that all right, too?"

Croft said curtly, "Let's have it."

Carl took a shaky breath. "Man, you're not going to like this. But it can't be any worse for me than it has been." He looked at Croft. "You might say I helped put you behind bars. Not that you wouldn't have been sentenced anyhow—" He gave a sobbing laugh. "That's what I kept telling myself, you see. Anything at all to justify my actions."

He clenched his hands together and went on in a low voice, "Two men visited my office before your case went to court. They swore they saw Finlay pull the knife, and I thought I had the case won—didn't think there would even be a trial. I saw Hackett and told him about it, told him he'd better drop his charges. He laughed at me. The next day those two men came in and said they'd made a mistake, and I knew Hackett had talked to them."

"Telling him their names was a fool thing to do," Croft said.

"I know, I know. But I thought that would settle it once and for all. Then Yount came to see me the day before the trial. He put a thousand dollars on my desk. I asked him what it was for. He shrugged and said you were as good as convicted, so there was no use in my mentioning the two witnesses; I couldn't prove what they'd said. He told me they had left the country."

"Dad did this?" Esther forced the words.

"I thought so at first, but I found out later that it was Yount's idea. He left the money and said he'd be back in twenty minutes. I realized it was a bribe, and I couldn't see any point to it because, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that without those two witnesses the case was as good as lost. I needed the money desperately. I was behind in my rent, I needed to keep up appearances —" He broke off. "I know it doesn't sound like much now, but at the time, needing the money, it was different. Oh, I justified myself," he said harshly. "I'd known lawyers, judges, supposedly respectable men that took bribes in order to swing a case a certain way. And you were already lost, Jim. Then Yount came back. The money was already in my billfold. He put a receipt down for me to sign—"

Esther said, "Is that what Yount's been holding over your head, honey?"

"He doctored the receipt later to say that the money had been paid in connection with the Croft case, and it was dated the day before the trial. It was enough to disbar me if he showed it to the right people. Not," he added bitterly, "that it makes much difference. I disbarred myself a long time ago."

"It still must mean something to you, though," Croft said acidly. "Otherwise you wouldn't let him run all over you." Carl lowered his head as though nodding. "Well

that's in the past and we might as well forget it," Croft went on. "But there's still the rest of it. Why is Yount out to get Rimrock Valley?"

"Jim, I don't know. I swear it. But I do know he wants it and means to get it for himself. That gunfighter—I really thought he was Finlay's friend looking for revenge until you—"

"I know," Croft said. He broke off and raised his head in an attitude of listening. At first he heard only the moaning of the wind and the slap of rain against the windows. Then he heard the thud of hoofs. So did Esther. She ran to a side window and peered through the glass.

"The crew's back. The rain must have caught them and—"

BEFORE she could finish, a door slammed open out back and heavy footsteps crossed the kitchen.

"Where's Red?" It was Yount. He saw Croft and stopped, then came on again and almost stumbled over Red's body. For a moment he stared down at it, then wheeled outside yelling, "He's here and he killed Red! Surround the house."

Carl went after him calling, "Yount, I'll have nothing—"

That was when Croft ran out the front door, thinking, they'll never listen to Carl. He heard Esther calling his name as he jumped the veranda railing, gun in hand, and saw two or three figures coming around back of the house. There was a yell and then a number of shots, as he ran low and hard away from the house. Faintly he heard Yount bellow, "He'll have his horse up on the slope! Mount up and go after him, and spread out!"

Some of them, still mounted, were pounding up the slope before he reached his horse. He jerked the reins free and flung himself into the saddle. As he galloped away, a rider pounded to within ten feet of him, reined in hard and fired. The black gelding shuddered beneath Croft, stumbled, and regained its footing. The Spade rider fired again and yelled, "There he goes! Get above him and drive him back!"

The rain held and the wind tore at the brush and small trees. Croft turned south, knowing that as long as the storm lasted he could keep out of their way. But he also knew that these storms struck and ended abruptly, like overturned buckets, then struck again. And this time Yount was after him for good.

He considered heading for town, but then thought that Yount would surely have men there watching Drew's place. There was nowhere he could go and be safe. His best chance was hill country. Maybe he could make it to the mine at Finger Butte and pick up another horse.

The black gelding had been badly hit. Croft knew it when the animal stumbled again and snorted with pain and terror. He heard a shout off to his right, then another shout behind him, and he thought, they're afraid they'll be shooting at each other.

Riding, he shaped a map of the country in his mind. Rimrock Valley lay off to his left; the Sand Hills loomed ahead. He kept the black at a hard run and suddenly, as though it had been turned off abruptly and for good, the rain stopped and moonlight shone from behind a massive cloud.

The black surged up a long slope, breath hissing from flaring nostrils. After another mile the animal stumbled again and almost went down, and Croft raked him unmercifully, riding desperately. Then, when he topped the slope, the horse slid to a stop and threw up its head in protest, sinking back on its haunches.

Croft leaped clear, jerked the rifle from the boot, and ran on. As he clawed through the brush of the opposite slope, he heard a yell and three shots behind him, and he knew one of them had found the black gelding.

It was then he remembered the mine, and he turned in that general direction. All afternoon, after riding away from the burned wreckage of the ranch house, he had scouted these hills to try and learn why Yount wanted Rimrock Valley. He had made a thorough check of the tunnel. Now he identified the shape of a hill in the darkness, but before he reached it the rain started again as suddenly as it had stopped.

Croft grinned tightly. The rain at least was his friend.

HE KEPT on at a steady trot around the hill. He stumbled across piles of tailing below the jagged shoulder, rain drenching him through to the skin. Then he was in the tunnel. He leaned against the rough wall, breathing hard, a faint roaring in his ears.

But he was as well off here as he would be anywhere else, he thought, and checked his guns. If need be, he could hold off almost an army here, for a little while. There was a good-sized boulder inside the entrance behind which he could barricade himself.

He looked out and listened but heard nothing but the wind and the steady drive of the rain. Then all at once he noticed that he was still hearing that faint roar. He frowned and moved deeper into the tunnel. It ran back about thirty feet, at which point the shaft fell abruptly. He went to his hands and knees directly, not knowing how far he had come, and as he moved forward the roaring became louder and louder.

Curiosity welled up in him, followed by a sudden thought. It was a thought that froze him momentarily, then made him grin. He went on until his groping hand met air; the shaft opened directly below him. He leaned over, and the sullen roar of water was audible. There were three tunnels down there, he remembered Johnny saying. So this was the answer—a subterranean river!

A dozen thoughts raced through Croft's mind. He knew how some springs dried up suddenly, how others suddenly appeared where there had never been a sign of water. A man could dig a well in one place and never hit moisture, while thirty feet away a second well would draw water to spare.

Johnny's well directly east of the mine was still pumping a little water, which meant that either it hadn't been dug deep enough or was not in line with the underground river, a river that hadn't flowed here when the shaft had been sunk. Out of some subtle change, a wearing away of soil and rock perhaps, the water that had flowed beneath Spade range had shifted to flow beneath Rimrock Valley, and Yount knew it.

The cloudburst was filling the river. Somewhere deep in the mountains the heavy rains and melting snows were draining into the earth and into the river. And Yount had learned this, perhaps from one of his riders who had stopped in the tunnel during a storm and had heard the roar of water in the shaft. With the thought, no wonder he wants Rimrock Valley, Croft started back to the mouth of the tunnel.

In that moment he heard a shout and the trample of hoofs. He levered a shell into the chamber of his rifle and eased back to the edge of the shaft, aware of a numbing alarm. The next second he made out the figure of a man, followed by another, then several more. It was Spade crew, seeking refuge from the storm. One of them coughed, and the sound was amplified in the tunnel.

Then a voice that he recognized as Yount's said, "He's got to be within a mile of here. As soon as this rain lets up we'll go after him."

"Be easy enough to track him if we had a little moonlight," another man said. "Hey, listen to that roar!"

"Don't go back there, you damn fool! You want to fall in?"

Croft crouched against the wall, knowing they could not see him unless one of them came within arm's reach. His mouth hardened as another man spoke. It was Granger's growl.

The deputy said, "I don't know that I like this, Yount, especially after what the Masons said about Croft shooting Red in self-defense."

"You been sniping at me all day," Yount said roughly. "What's wrong with you?"

"There's a bad feeling in town against me, especially since folks learned that Stanton's place was burned down. That damn Shaw's been talking—him and Winder and Wyatt. Even if they can't prove it, they know you raided Stanton's ranch."

"You letting that badge go to your head, is that it?"

"No. But if you want me on your side, you're gonna have to ease up. Shaw sent wire to the county seat about me. And the way Mason talked back to you at the ranch—"

"The hell with Mason!" Yount exploded. "And the hell with Spade, too. I know what I know and I want this valley. And once we

take care of Croft it'll be mine, don't worry about that."

GRANGER growled something, and another man said, "Rain's letting up." Suddenly Croft saw a shape move toward him. Yount spoke sharply, but the man kept coming. Croft could hear him groping along the wall, and he crouched lower.

"Dean, come back here," Yount said. "You fall in and you'll drown sure."

"I just want to see," Dean said.

He came forward on hands and knees now. Croft lowered his rifle slowly, softly, and drew his Colt. He settled forward onto his knees.

edge of the milling circle around Yount.

"He can't have gotten far," Yount said. "Granger, take three men and scout the head of the valley. Stark, you and Bond and Travers work toward that limestone—"

There came a faint shout. Croft, who had been listening for something like this, heard it first and saw Dean staggering from the tunnel. Someone said, "That's him!" and Croft moved his horse behind a pile of tailings as the others all turned toward Dean.

He heard Dean shout angrily, "Somebody slugged—" and spurred the horse toward the valley. They were behind him in the darkness when he heard their shouts. He leaned for-

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"All right, let's go," Yount said curtly. "Come on, Dean."

"Listen to it," Dean said.

The man was less than three feet from him. Suddenly he became still. In that moment Croft struck him on the temple.

"What?" Yount said. Croft rose, shielding the rifle with his slicker. "Dammit, Dean—" Yount began, and then went on out as he saw the crouched figure coming.

The horses had been tied in the lee of the shoulder, and men were mounting them. Croft, his head lowered, counted ten and saw the empty saddle that would be Dean's. Rain still fell, but it was dark enough so that Croft could not identify faces as he pulled into the saddle and allowed his horse to drift to the

ward in leather and pushed the horse hard.

Never having known the Drews, with whom Emma and Johnny were staying, and not knowing where they lived, he swung down in the alley back of Shaw's saloon and sent the horse running on with sharp slaps of his hat. Then he went in and caught Shaw's attention.

He told Shaw quickly what had happened, and asked the way to Drew's house. A moment later he was outside again, running to the outskirts of town.

He came up behind the house, seeing no one, and rapped on the door, then opened it and stepped inside. He saw light in the front room. Then a figure blocked out the light, stopped and said, "What the hell—"

"Where are Johnny and Emma?"

At his voice, Emma rushed past the man, saying, "Jim! Oh, I'm glad you're all right."

She came straight into his arms as though she belonged there, as though she had been seeking them and had finally found them.

"Johnny's asleep," she began shakily, but Croft stopped her.

"Take me to him. I want all of you to hear this."

In Johnny's room, he told them about it. "I had to let you know right away in case something happened to me, because they'll be after me, that's for sure."

Hard on the heels of his words came a sharp crash as the front door was flung open. Drew, his face enraged, rose, but Croft stopped him. Gun in hand, he stood beside the open bedroom doorway as Yount strode along the short hallway and stopped to look inside. Granger and one other man appeared behind him.

Yount said harshly, "Where is he?" and in that moment caught sight of Croft. "All right, Granger, take him in."

Croft said softly, his gun on Yount, "On what charge?"

"Murder," Yount rasped, a wicked light in his eyes. "You killed Red."

"And Granger knows what Carl and Emma had to say about that," Croft said, not taking his eyes off Yount. "Don't you, Granger?" Granger made a rough sound and said nothing. "You're licked, Yount," Croft went on. "We know now why you wanted Rimrock Valley. If there are any charges to be made, Johnny will make them against you."

Yount stood for a moment in raging uncertainty before turning to Granger and saying, "Arrest this man!"

"Charlie—" the deputy began, and then shook his head. "It was all right as far as it went, but—" He broke off, shrugged.

Yount stood there a moment longer, then suddenly turned and pushed Granger roughly aside, saying across his shoulder, "Croft, you'll never see daylight again."

Croft said, "Hold it, Yount!" but the Spade foreman and his rider pushed outside.

So this was not the end of it, Croft thought. He wheeled to the back door and so started around the house. There came to him the sound of running feet, then Sam Shaw's shout.

"You boys had better realize that Yount's licked! So either clear out or face up!"

Coming alongside the porch, Croft saw four or five men on foot with rifles. Granger came out on the porch and one of the riders said angrily, "What about it?"

Granger answered gruffly, "I reckon he's right. You boys want to keep working for Spade, you'd better make your peace with Mason pronto."

"Hell!" the rider said, and turned his horse and rode away, followed by the others. There was no sign of Yount, and a warning prickled the back of Croft's neck. He turned his head but saw nothing behind him, then retraced his steps to the back door.

On reaching the corner of the house, he stopped for a split second, for he had noticed movement at a shed out back. Then Yount said softly and wickedly, "Come and get it, Croft," and Croft knew the other had the advantage here, for he could not see Yount.

He threw himself down as flame stabbed from the muzzle of Yount's gun. He felt the bullet tear through the flesh of his arm as he fired in return. Then, still moving, he fired again and saw a shadow stagger grotesquely away from the shed and pitch forward. He came up and crouched over the figure.

"Where is it, Yount?" Croft said. "You wrecked his life. You want to keep on hurting him?"

"Ah!" Yount breathed. "A man—always hopes he'll rest easy."

"The receipt," Croft said.

"In—my billfold. Tell—" Yount made a strangling sound and was dead. Croft slipped the billfold from his pocket and straightened. Later he could take the receipt and toss the billford here in the muck where it would be found. He owed Carl Mason nothing, but a man deserved a second chance.

He rose, feeling weak, feeling dizzy, and heard Emma say, "Jim, are you all right?"

Then her arm was around his waist, his around her shoulder, and he took a long, long breath and said, "More than just all right, princess. A great deal more."

"WELCOME BACK,

Screenland *and* Silver Screen

It's good to know that those two sparkling movie magazines, SCREENLAND and SILVER SCREEN, are returning to the newsstands. They're among my favorites and it will be a pleasure to read them again. Welcome!"

—Marilyn Monroe, star of 20th Century Fox production, "Seven Year Itch"

Marilyn Monroe's enthusiasm represents the way Hollywood's great stars have welcomed SCREENLAND Magazine back. You'll find the exciting current issue of SCREENLAND Magazine on all newsstands now. SILVER SCREEN will be there soon too. You won't want to miss either.

Sincerely,

Ida Lupino

Editor
SCREENLAND and SILVER SCREEN

Uncertain

UNTIL Clark Nolen came along, Alberta Sheppard had always considered herself plain and unattractive. She had been neat and careful in her appearance and nothing more. What had been the use?

But one approving look of Clark Nolen's steel-gray eyes and Alberta's blonde hair took on the sheen of brushed gold. Her eyes, lost between gray and green and blue, found a radiance of their own, like the dazzling clarity of a rain-polished summer morning. Even her five feet six of slender height that had towered to embarrassment above several of the stocky youths at the country dance seemed to balance beautifully alongside Clark's six feet two of lean, muscular frame.

Alberta Sheppard had found her love.

Then Clark Nolen went away. And she had only his uncertain promise.

"When I get back, Alberta, there's a question I hope I can ask you." He had gripped her hands so tightly that the pain added to the tears already in her eyes. "Alberta, when I come back—"

Then he was gone. Little puffs of dust hung in the quiet evening air behind his horse's hoofs. At the end of the lane he turned in the saddle to wave, and Alberta waved to him. Then he faded into a dim shadow on the road to Hackberry.

Alberta stumbled blindly about her evening chores. But her heart sang. Clark Nolen would be back!

Early the next morning she hurried out to the stable to saddle her pinto pony. The ride to Hackberry would do her good, she decided. Anyway, she needed a can of baking powder. She wasn't following Clark Nolen, she assured herself. But there was still a chance that she might see him once more before he left on his mysterious errand.

She found her younger brother, Homer, already astride the pinto and practicing a rope trick Clark had taught him.

"That Clark Nolen," Homer called. "That's the kind of a man *I* want to be!" His freckled nose wrinkled with disgust when Alberta unexpectedly kissed him.

The four dusty miles to Hackbery flashed past under the pinto's

CLARK NOLEN WAS the only man who had ever made Alberta happy, and she had to believe in him . . . in spite of all the evidence

Promise

By LLOYD KEVIN

"Inside the jail," Alberta ordered. "Quick!"

hoofs. At the Fresh Creek bridge, Alberta looked with brightened interest to the west, where the green of the valley lay like a soft rug between sheltering hills. That was Sol Vickers's Rafter-M Ranch, the biggest, richest cattle outfit around Hackberry.

CLARK NOLEN had an option to buy that ranch, he had told her. He had until the twenty-second—eighteen more days. Then the lawyer would be in town to settle the deal. Since old Sol Vickers died the ranch foreman had been carrying on the work, keeping the place in top shape for whatever new owner might be lucky enough to raise the purchase price in cold cash that the deal demanded.

Alberta's heart quickened with the thought. If Clark meant to meet the lawyer, he had to be back by the twenty-second. Only eighteen days to wait!

When Clark Nolen had come to Hackbery, the drab and dusty little crossroads settlement had, in Alberta's eyes, immediately taken on the spirit of a thriving town. The rough and crooked plank sidewalk had acquired the polish of a romantic avenue. Riding in now, Alberta was surprised to find the glamour still persisting, even with Clark gone.

It was because he hadn't left *her*, she realized happily. He was still right there with her in spirit, safe in her heart.

She rode twice past his hotel, to be certain that he no longer waited in the lobby. Then, with glistening eyes, she stopped at the general store for her can of baking powder.

She wasn't sure where she first heard the news that Dex Rawnson's horse corral had been raided. Dex was a horse trader and buyer. He made it a top-paying business, and his corrals always held dozens of heads of valuable animals. During the night somebody had clubbed down Carl Jones, the thin, quiet little wrangler, and had made off with all the thoroughbred stock.

It was Ed Malloy, the storekeeper, who first spoke against Clark Nolen.

"I hate to say this, Miss," Ed declared, "since you sort of kept company with Nolen, but Dex claims he spotted Nolen riding toward the corrals less than a half hour before Jones got hit."

Alberta's heart pounded crazily in her throat, and she gripped the counter with white-knuckled fingers.

"It's a mistake," she cried. "Clark would never steal—never harm a living soul! It's wrong for Dex to even think that."

Malloy nodded. "I know how you feel, Miss, but Carl Jones just died this morning, and everybody's kinda het up."

After the second and third time she heard it, Alberta stopped denying the story. People would only shake their heads and turn away. Then, from a distance, they would stare at her.

Let them stare, she thought angrily. Let them look until their eyes ached. Clark Nolen would come back, and they would learn their mistake. Then they'd all wanting to make up to her. They'd be sweet as service-berry pie to her then!

A sudden fear chilled her heart. Clark had to come back now to clear himself. *He had to come back!*

Alberta took the long road home, letting the pony walk and graze by the roadside. Homer met her at the stable door, a frown twisting his freckles.

"Well," he said, "your Clark Nolen wasn't so much after all, was he?"

Alberta struck him across the head with her gloves, and was instantly ashamed of her anger. "Must you turn against him, too?" She asked. "Without giving the man a chance?"

"Gee, Bertie," Homer said, ducking away, "Everybody knows he was trying to buy the Rafter-M. And Banker Thompson says he never had a single copper penny in the bank."

Alberta pushed the dread thought from her mind. Clark couldn't have been planning to buy the Rafter-M with money from stolen horses. She wouldn't even let herself think about it.

SHE hurried on to get supper on the table for her father and Homer. The rush of work would be a welcome relief.

Sam Sheppard was a medium-sized, colorless man, only an inch taller than his daughter. When his wife died six years before, he had moved out into an empty bunkhouse and left the house to Alberta and little Homer. Since that time he had only come in for his meals.

otherwise keeping his own silent company.

Tonight he took his place at the table, but he poked at the boiled beef without appetite. He waited until Alberta came to take her straight-backed chair.

"Bertie," he said then, a trifle too loudly, "I've been hearing talk about that man Nolen you went with."

Alberta stared at her plate, her hands clenched under the table.

"What I want to know, Bertie—" Sam persisted. "Did the feller ask you to marry him?"

Alberta slowly shook her head. "Not yet." She faltered.

"Hmph!" Sam snorted. There was a hard frown on his weathered brow. "I figgered as much! But what I want to know, did he—did he ever—" Sam Sheppard stopped, embarrassed by his own question.

Alberta jumped up, her face blazing hot, and dashed from the room. When her own family no longer trusted her judgment, the Sheppard ranch home had shrunk too small!

But where could she turn? She tossed sleeplessly through the night, twisting in her mind the few fragments of information Clark had told her about himself. He had mentioned mining property, a rich strike in silver and zinc. But if he had named the location, she had been too absorbed with the light in his steel-gray eyes to remember. She hadn't the slightest idea, she realized, where she could look for him.

The next day dragged endlessly. Every stray hoof-beat brought Alberta to the door, her breath short. But there was no sign of Clark Nolen.

At dusk, quiet Perry Rawnson came to call. He was a man of medium stature, with yellow, curly hair and mild vacant blue eyes that looked with the same expression on man, animal, or dusty landscape. He appeared years younger than his bigger brother, Dex, but it could have been only his placid, untroubled face.

"Sorry your brother lost his horses," Alberta commented.

Perry looked up with puzzled eyes. "No loss," he said simply.

"But they were stolen out of the corral."

Perry Rawnson studied the idea a moment. "But he already sold 'em. Must have been the other feller's loss." He looked back down to his dusty boots again.

Alberta made no further attempt at conversation. An hour later, Perry ate a slice of cake, drank his coffee, and left.

The next morning came, still with no word from Clark. Alberta could wait no longer. She had found an excuse—she had to post a letter, a mail order for a special sewing thread.

A mile outside Hackberry, she met Dex Rawnson on the road. The contrast between the brothers was startling. This man's eyes were alert, always shifting behind the veil of smoke from his habitual cigar. His hair was dusty-gray-blond under a dark hat. His thin lips above a stubborn chin scarcely moved with his words.

"I hear," he remarked, "that my kid brother went calling on you last night!"

Alberta nodded. She nudged the pony to edge past him.

Dex smiled thinly. "That boy is a mighty good catch for some lucky gal. I'm giving him a half interest in the Rafter-M as soon as I take it over, the twenty-second of this month."

ALBERTA rode on with turbulent heart. For the first time she had to accept the possibility of someone other than Clark buying Vicker's Rafter-M. Dex Rawnson, with his horses, could be Clark's only competitor. And Perry had said that Dex suffered no loss from the raid. Alberta galloped through town with tears blurring the buildings before her eyes.

The little rail-junction camp of Castle Butte sat at the rocky foot of a bald mountain eighteen miles from Hackberry. It was a smoky, cinder-crunchy, desolate place, a stage stop and a hangout for drifters and Indians too lazy to hold a riding job.

The pinto's head drooped tiredly at the depot hitchrack while Alberta inquired inside. Nobody had seen Clark Nolen.

One other man in town might have been able to help—Ben Nichols, the town marshal. But Ben had gone east to a brother's funeral, the station agent informed Alberta. A raw-boned deputy named Millard Worsley was holding down the jail for a few weeks.

Alberta rode past the marshal's office. Worsley sat on the steps of the jail building, spitting tobacco juice into the dust of the street. He eyed her with the speculative stare of a turkey buzzard as she passed. Alberta shivered and hurried the pony to a trot.

She rode around through the valley town of Gimble Creek on the way home. Nobody there had seen Clark Nolen.

That night, Perry Rawnson came again to call. He sat on the edge of the porch and braided grass stems into a green and crooked rope. When the moon came up he started home.

"That Perry Rawnson," Sam Sheppard said at the breakfast table the next morning, "is a man that won't ever get into trouble."

"No," Alberta countered, "he isn't bright enough. He's hardly more than a half-wit."

She was being unkind, she admitted to herself, and not entirely fair. Perry Rawnson might be only shy and slow-thinking.

"Don't need more than half his wits," Sam said, "as long as big brother Dex looks after him. It's mighty touching the way Dex has always stepped aside to help his brother. Now Dex is buying the Rafter-M just so he can give Perry a half interest. Dex would make a fine brother-in-law for a lucky girl."

Alberta darted from the room, nausea threatening the few bites of breakfast she had managed to choke down.

Perry came again that evening—as punctually as if his brother had sent him, Alberta thought. But she tried to be kind and attentive to him. He seemed harmless as a newborn calf. And she had to admit a greater appreciation for the older brother who spent his life caring for this simple, guileless man.

Every other night for the next week, Perry Rawnson sat on the edge of the Sheppard porch and braided his grass stems. And even the moon in his eyes made no change in his expression.

It was on one of the alternate evenings that Homer sneaked back into the house after supper and surprised Alberta at the dishes.

"Bertie," he said, chewing a straw and staring down at his boots, "I don't know that I ought to tell you this, but even a crook like Nolen would be better to have around than that dumb, moon-faced Perry."

"Homer!" Alberta grabbed him by the arms and shook him in quick anxiety. "You've heard from Clark? You know where he is?"

"Naw!" Homer wagged his tousled head violently. "But a feller in town was hinting that Nolen might be back tonight."

Alberta waited until the light in the bunkhouse went out. Then she hurried to the stable and saddled the pinto. Clark might not come directly to the house to see her, but he would surely ride past their favorite meeting place, the willows at the bend of Fresh Creek.

THINKING ahead, Alberta dashed back to the house for her carbine. She slipped in etxra shells and slid it into the saddle scabbard. Clark might not yet know that he was in danger. Somebody could be following him, trying to trap him.

The moon floated high when she reached the willows. She sat still in the saddle, the drumming of her heart loud even above the noisy chorus of bullfrogs. But though she waited hour after patient hour, there was no sight of Clark Nolen's tall silhouette in the moonlight.

Then a dread thought crept in. Could Clark have come back only to steal more horses? The very hint of it sickened her. She forced it from her mind. But desperation would no longer let her wait in the quiet shadows. She had to know!

Dex Rawnson's pasture and corrals stretched east of town. Alberta was still a quarter-mile away when she heard the yelling, and the thunder of stampeding hoofs. She crowded the pinto faster, her heart a rhythm of quickening pain.

Jay Hutchinson, the wrangler who had taken Carl Jones' place, swung into his saddle and spurred out in the pale light. Then dull orange flames winked from the dust, and Hutchinson spilled off his horse to lie still in the field.

Choking, Alberta reined toward the stampeding horses, straining her eyes through the dust cloud for the familiar form she would have given her life not to see.

There *was* a rider ahead, a man hunched low in the saddle. He spurred a dark horse through the shadows, hazing the band of thoroughbreds ahead of him. But it *wasn't*

Clark Nolen. She would have recognized even the faintest glimpse of the man whose tall silhouette rode through her every dream.

She had to stop this strange rider, this horse thief. He alone could clear Clark's name, could prove to the people of Hackberry that Clark Nolen had never raided Rawnson's corrals.

Alberta found the carbine in her hands. She levered a shell into the chamber and swung the weapon up to call a warning. But the little pinto stepped into the hollow of a forgotten badger hole and stumbled. The carbine spat fire and slammed back in her grip. Directly ahead, the man pitched from his horse and sprawled across the dusty ground.

Other riders appeared out of nowhere, ranchers and townsmen attracted by the shooting. They reached the scene almost as soon as Alberta could dismount and put away the weapon. They rolled the man over. It was Dex Rawnson!

Alberta stared at the shadowy face, her mind numb. It couldn't be Dex. He wouldn't have been stealing his own horses!

But the man was speaking, whispering huskily. "Chasing the hoss-thief," he managed. "Clark Nolen was after my stock again. I had him on the run, but he must have shot me."

Alberta pushed past the men and dropped to her knees. "Dex!" she cried. "Dex, are you sure?"

Dex Rawnson's eyes found her face. "Bertie—my brother's girl—" Then consciousness left him.

For nearly a week the horse trader lay in a coma in the doctor's spare room. Alberta put in listless, heavy-eyed days and fitful, restless nights, fighting sleep and the dreams that still quivered with pictures of Clark Nolen's sober face, his serious steel-gray eyes. There was always the dread that Clark would come back for more horses and prove his guilt, always the hope that Dex had been mistaken, that Clark was innocent.

IN ALL this uncertain time, Perry Rawnson stayed away from the Sheppard ranch. Dex no longer directed him to call, Alberta thought wryly.

Finally came the word that Dex Rawnson would recover. He was eating, sleeping normally, gaining strength. Alberta saddled and rode into town. The doctor welcomed her with quick enthusiasm.

"My wife," he explained, "is my only nurse. She's been looking after Rawnson night and day until she's near done in. Could you take over in the daytime for a while?"

Alberta nodded. It was the least she could do after shooting the man out of his saddle.

She sat by the bedside and read the newspaper aloud. She fluffed up the pillows and gave Dex a spoonful of tonic in a glass of water every hour, as the doctor had ordered. And she rubbed his sprained shoulder with the liniment from the other bottle. The sprain

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Fistic Finale

By LIMERICK LUKE

A hopeful young cowgal named Rose
Had a suitor who would not propose.
After months of just sittin',
She gave him the mitten
With a bash on her bashful beau's nose!

he'd received in his fall from the horse seemed to give him more pain than the bullet wound that kept him in bed.

Through the long day, Dex accepted her help with grateful eyes, and made no complaint. And Alberta never found the courage to ask again the question that worried her every waking moment—how could he be sure he'd seen Clark Nolen in the waning moonlight?

Alberta rode in to town the next day and the next. Each time Dex greeted her quietly, contentedly. He asked if Perry had been to see her, and he gripped her hand at parting, seemingly reluctant to let her go.

Maybe, Alberta thought, she had always misjudged Dex Rawnson. Any man so kind and thoughtful of his younger brother couldn't be the conniver her intuition had first named him.

The following morning, Alberta noticed a stranger at the hotel as she rode past. She intended to mention the man to Dex, to keep him informed of doings in town. But she found her patient trying to sit up in bed. She hurried to help him, and he caught her hands, tried to pull her to him, his eyes feverishly hungry.

Alberta slipped away from him, averting her hot face. "Dex," she said quickly to cover her embarrassment, "I haven't seen Perry for several days."

Rawnsons' eyes narrowed. "The devil with Perry! I wish he'd break his fool neck so I'd be rid of the dimwit for good."

Alberta gasped. "But you've always looked out for him."

"Half my life!" Dex gritted. "I made a promise and I had to keep it. But how do you think I feel, sending him to call on you when I'm crazy in love with you myself!"

Alberta backed away, staring, and the color drained from her cheeks. This was a different Dex Rawnson than she had ever seen before.

"Never knew you to look so pretty," Dex persisted, "as you have this past month. It's enough to drive a man out of his head."

Alberta felt a twinge of pain in her heart. If there had been a new light in her eyes, a new warmth to her face, it had been all because of Clark Nolen.

"Forget my half-wit brother," Dex said. "Marry me, Bertie, and we'll have the Rafter-M all to ourselves. The lawyer's already in town to close the deal. Just say the word, Bertie."

Alberta's pulse froze. The well-dressed stranger at the hotel—that would be the lawyer. And Clark had never come back. He would be too late now, too late.

LISTLESSLY, mechanically, she poured a spoonful of liquid from the bottle, stirred it into a glass of water, and handed it to Dex. He seized it from her, his eyes smoldering with rapacious hunger, and gulped it down.

For an instant he sat stunned, his mouth agape. Then he screamed, and the sound choked off to a convulsive whisper.

"You poisoned me," he rasped, and his body shook and writhed on the bed. "You tricked me! Poison—get the doctor—"

Alberta stood rigid, numb, unable to grasp what she saw. The empty glass banged to the floor and rolled, unbroken, across the braided rug and against the wall. Then her eyes flashed to the two bottles on the table, and a shock wave of sickness tore through her. She had spooned out fiery liniment instead of the mild tonic. She had made a crazy, careless, inexcusable blunder!

"You're in league with Nolen," Dex gasped, his eyes wild with rage and mortal terror. "You're trying to get even with me." He clawed at his throat, fighting to climb out of bed.

Something clicked instinctively in Alberta's mind, beyond her own will, a response prompted by the fear in the man's face. She forced herself to nod, to harden her eyes against him.

"Tell me," she demanded, "where Clark Nolen is. Tell me and I'll get the doctor."

Dex choked and retched, his face purple as a bursting grape. "Get doctor—help—" He dug at the covers. "Nolen in jail—Castle Butte—" He fell back on bed, unconscious.

Behind Alberta, the door burst open and Doctor Barnes hurried into the room. Alberta whirled to face him.

"I made a terrible mistake, Doctor. Gave him liniment."

The doctor stared down at his patient.

"Plenty rough on the man, but it won't kill him."

Alberta mumbled an excuse and dashed past the doctor and out the door. Her carbine was still in the saddle scabbard, she discovered thankfully as she swung into the saddle and reined the little pinto out on the road to Castle Butte.

Just what she would do when she reached the town, she had no idea. She did not even try to think. If Clark Nolen were really in the Castle Butte jail, she'd find a way to get him out.

The eighteen miles seemed like forty. The sun had slanted from west of the zenith by the time she turned down the main street. But Deputy Marshal Millard Worsley still perched his raw-boned bulk on the steps of the jail building.

Alberta drew out the carbine as she swung down behind the pinto. Worsley was taken so by surprise that his heavy jaw sagged and the cigarette tumbled from his lips.

"Hold on!" he said thickly. "I'm the *law* here!"

"Inside," Alberta ordered. "Inside the jail—quick!"

There was only one prisoner.

"Alberta," Clark cried, "how did you find me?"

The sight of him in the shadowy cell, the sound of his voice, almost overcame her. She fought the tears from her eyes. Pentup rage helped her to prod the deputy over against the bars.

"I can't do it," Worsley pleaded. "I can't turn him loose. Dex Rawnson is my brother-in-law. I owe him money. Got to do what he says. Got to keep this man hidden out here." But the husky deputy moved under the force of Alberta's gun muzzle. He unlocked the cell. Then he whirled abruptly with the speed of a angered grizzly and slapped the carbine out of her hands.

Alberta screamed and grabbed at him. He swung a heavy arm and sent her sprawling across the room and into corner.

BUT Clark Nolen was out of the cell. His fist took Worsley below the ear, and the carbine tumbled underfoot. The big deputy roared in startled pain and spun on on Clark. His huge arms worked like locomotive pistons as he tried to beat his prisoner down.

Alberta stifled her scream in her throat. Somebody else was coming, frantic footsteps beating the plank walk outside. She hesitated only long enough to see Clark battle into the clear, to see him handing back blow for blow with the bigger man. Then she jumped to the door just as a tousle-haired woman burst in.

The woman looked enough like Dex Rawnson to be his twin sister. "What are they trying to do to you, Mill?" she yelled. "I'll get this—"

Alberta blocked her way. The woman slapped her across the face so hard that bells rang and colored lights appeared before her eyes. Wildly Alberta struck out at the woman. She caught a handful of the touseled hair and yanked with all her ranch-born strength. Then she stumbled backward and lost balance. Desperately, she fought to twist the woman around, to fall on her as they went down.

Alberta kept a grip on the tangled hair. She kept bumping the woman's head down against the board floor, until Clark came and caught her shoulders and lifted her to her feet.

"Worsley's out cold," Clark stated. "I dumped him in the cell."

Alberta grabbed up the woman and shoved her into the cage with her husband, and Clark locked the door. He tossed the keys into the corner.

"Somebody'll let 'em out," he said.

Alberta slumped into Clark's arms then, her strength suddenly as spent as the anger that had driven her on. She clung to him, sobbing uncontrollably in the sheer relief of being with him.

Clark kissed her hair, her cheek, her lips. "Darling Bertie, it was like seeing an angel when you walked in." His arms were gentle and possessive around her. "I'd almost given up hope."

Alberta stiffened, and panic whipped up her pulse. "The lawyer—he's in Hackberry! Clark, Dex Rawnson's trying to buy the Raft-M!" She pushed out of Clark's arms. "We have no time to waste."

Clark nodded, his steel-gray eyes chilled. "I heard the deputy and his wife talking.

Rawnson's been selling horses and stealing 'em back, giving me all the blame. Neat little scheme he had, with his brother-in-law holding me here in this jail, incommunicado and without warrant, until the deal was finished. Then they'd turn me out for the good citizens of Hackberry to shoot for a horse-thief."

Clark dug into the deputy's desk and retrieved his sixgun and shell belt. He grabbed up the fallen carbine from the floor.

"Worst of all," he added bitterly, "I hear that Dex killed a couple of his own wranglers and added the shooting to my score."

With Alberta close behind him, Clark burst through the outside door, gun in hand. The two Indians and the railroad brakeman on the street gave them no attention. Worsley had made few friends. They found Clark's horse and saddle in the deputy's shed and lost no time getting mounted.

Alberta reined toward Hackberry, but Clark motioned her back. In anxious surprise she followed him down the main street, all the way to the depot and the express office.

"About time you showed up," the agent said in greeting. "I was going to send this package back to where it come from."

Clark Nolen paid the charges and they hurried out of the office. "I sold my silver mine," he explained quickly, buttoning the parcel into his shirt, "and had the cash sent to me here."

THE weary miles back to Hackberry seemed to Alberta only half as long, even though she only had time to grip Clark's hand once or twice for reassurance as they rode. But the hours slid by, and the moon had limped beyond the hills by the time they reached the outskirts of town.

Clark spurred on toward the hotel, throwing caution aside. It was Alberta's anxious eyes that spotted Doctor Barnes in the lamplight of an open house door.

The doctor peered up at Alberta, trying to see past her in the shadows. "Dex?" he answered her question. "The wife and I had to leave him alone—had to look after Nellie Root's baby. But I saw that lawyer feller heading over to the house to try to close his Rafter-M ranch deal."

Clark spurred through an alley, and Alberta had to hurry her horse to keep up. He was already out of the saddle and heading for the doctor's doorway as she reined in.

But somebody moved on the porch. It was Perry Rawnson, his yellow hair shining faintly in the reflected light. He stepped out to block Clark's path, plainly following his brother's orders.

She saw Clark duck a heavy blow and grapple with Perry, making no move to strike or harm the quiet Rawnson brother.

But the slow strength of Perry Rawnson was not to be ignored. He forced Clark back across the porch. Only by pivoting his weight as he turned could Clark shake the man off. Clark dropped to one knee as he spun around, and Perry let go his hold to reel across the boards and slam into the open doorway.

Instantly there came a gunshot from inside the house. Perry Rawnson quivered like a pine under the ax. He took an uncertain step, staggering, falling, and his momentum carried him into the shadows.

Clark Nolen strode through the doorway, gun in hand. The second shot from inside tore a long ragged sliver from the door frame, and the third ripped Clark's shirt and scorched his skin. Then Clark's gun spoke twice.

Dex screamed, then choked to silence.

The lawyer's voice came plainly above the echoes. "Let me out of this loco house! First time I ever saw a man jump out of sick-bed to *start* a gun-fight."

"Hold on," Clark said. "You and I have got business—the Rafter-M. But first I want you to witness this man's story. Dex Rawnson's still got enough life in him to confess."

Alberta found Perry Rawnson lying at the very edge of the porch. He was dead.

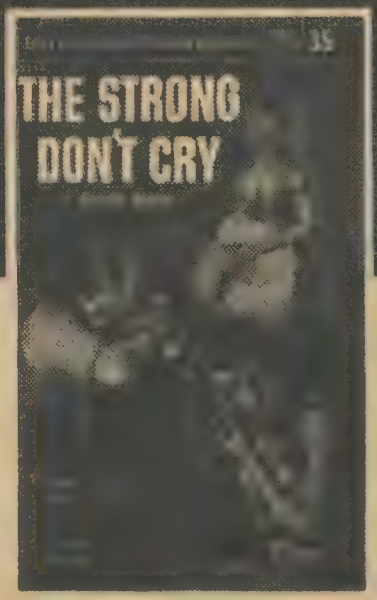
Clark came after a moment and helped her to her feet. Alberta found herself crying.

"I got the Rafter-M," he announced quietly. "A real home for you. That is, if you'll marry me."

Alberta threw herself into his arms and gripped him tight as he kissed away her tears. Never, she knew, not for one moment, had she ever really doubted!

"WHEN I MARRIED HIM I WAS DRAGGED TO HIS DEPTHS..."

My husband had
big-shot ambitions.
But deep-inside he was only a
cheap, small-time gambler."



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Bride

of Treachery

by HERBERT D. KASTLE

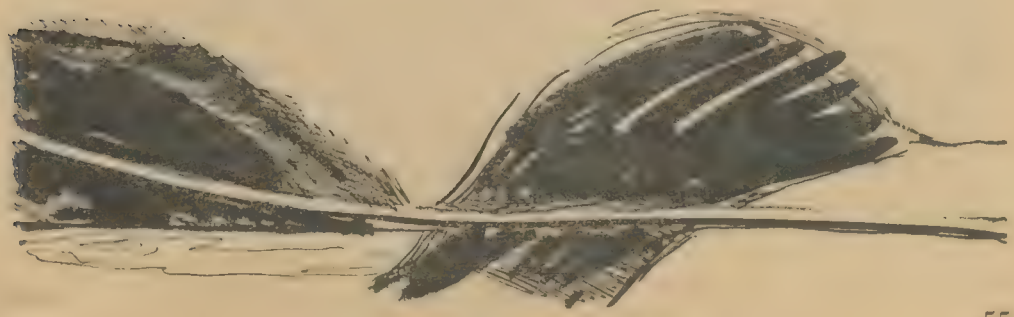
EDITH MOWERY left the Fort Davis stage at Burgell's Landing, and examined the run-down buildings lost in the immensity of near-desert. There was a house and a barn—and nothing else as far as the eye could see.

A man led out a team of fresh horses, harnessed them quickly, then disappeared into the barn with the gaunted team. He returned to pick up Edith's trunk, and vanished again, into the house this time. Then the driver, guard and two passengers waved good-by and the coach rolled out.

Edith was sorry to see it go. The two passengers—lieutenants in the US Cavalry—had been very kind. As the stage had traveled into progressively more barren country, they had talked to her almost continuously. But she hadn't needed cheering up. This trip was something she'd dreamed of for a long time.

If anyone needed cheering up, she thought, it was the two

TWO MEN COVETED Edith Mowery . . . and the life or death of four innocent people hung on her decision



army men themselves. They were on their way to Fort Davis to fight those implacable Apaches the newspapers were writing about —Geronimo, Victorio, Juh, and the others— whose unbelievable brutalities were known even in the East.

For a moment she almost felt guilty, going to a safe, comfortable ranch while they traveled into danger. But then she smiled at herself. Soldiers who had fought in the Civil War would be well equipped to handle a few renegade Indians. Anyway, that's what Uncle Desmond had said, and Uncle Desmond was a member of the Boston Militia. Of course, he'd never left the city limits, but he was a military man all the same.

She snapped out of her thoughts and turned to the house. A very tall man— the one who had changed the horses and taken her trunk— and a very small boy were staring at her. She flushed a little under the man's stare, though she was far from unaccustomed to male approval. She was a medium-sized girl in her early twenties, with black hair, brown eyes, and a face pert enough to make most men stop for a second look. Despite her severely cut, sober-hued traveling suit, her figure managed to reveal some of its firm curves and youthful litheness.

Now she smiled and said, her accent clearly proclaiming Back Bay Boston, "This is Burgell's Landing?"

The man nodded. The little boy suddenly turned and ran through the open door into the house.

"Sort of shy," the man said apologetically. "We don't get many women visitors."

"That's quite all right," Edith said. "But where is the rest of the town? This can't be *all* of it."

THE MAN smiled a nice smile, Edith noted subconsciously—but what he said gave her a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach.

"I'm afraid it is, ma'am. I'm Burgell. This is my house and that's my barn. I run the stage change, and a general-store business too. The shy six-year-old is my son, Andy. We've been the entire population of Burgell's Landing since my wife was taken two years ago." His smile widened. "Now you've got the whole picture."

Edith was shaken. She'd expected something primitive, but nothing so—so desolate! "The maps actually list this place," she murmured. "It doesn't make sense."

"Sure it does." Burgell replied. "They've got to list it. No other place to list within a hundred miles, outside of the Trevort spread near the border and Byron's place near Los Muertes Canyon."

Edith Mowery sighed in relief. "You know Wallace Byron? That's my destination—his ranch. He's—" She blushed but went on. "He's my fiance. We're going to be married today."

Burgell's eyes widened. "But that isn't possible!" Before she could react, he made hasty amends. "No offense intended, ma'am. It's just that—" He stopped and swallowed nervously.

Though his reaction seemed a little odd, Edith found she was beginning to like him. His smile was lonely, reaching for her friendship, and she had a sudden insight into what life must be like for this widower with his six-year-old child.

"I don't know what you intended to say, Mr. Burgell," Edith murmured, "but I can hazard a guess. Is there some difficulty arranging for a minister out here? Is that what's worrying you?" She smiled calmly, to show him she was no rigid Puritan who would be outraged by a delay of a day or two in a marriage ceremony. She and Wallace had waited four years while they were far apart; they could wait a few days together.

Burgell shook his head. "No, ma'am, that isn't it. A woman like you wouldn't need watching until Singing Pete made his rounds." He stopped in sudden confusion. "What I mean is—"

Edith decided that this had gone just a little too far. He had no right to talk so familiarly to her. And yet, for some unfathomable reason, she had to *force* an indignant tone into her voice.

"Then what is it, Mr. Burgell?"

He cleared his throat. "I don't mean to pry, ma'am, but did Byron write for you to come, or did you do it on your own?"

Edith felt herself redden, and her indignation was genuine this time. "I'm afraid that is none of your business!" She added coldly, "Please afford me transportation to Wallace Byron's ranch immediately."

He looked at her and slowly shook his head. "I won't do it," he muttered. "I won't let you walk into that place without a warning. Maybe you'll hate me for telling you, but I got to."

Edith merely stared at him.

"You see," Burgell said quietly, "Byron bought a Chiricahua squaw the second month he was out here, almost four years ago. He's got two kids, and the whole family is at the ranch. I guess he couldn't bring himself to tell you."

The sun seemed to swell to ten times its normal size and burn itself into her brain. She sprang forward and slapped Burgell across the mouth. "Liar!" she panted. "He wrote me only six weeks ago and said he was putting the ranch in order for my arrival. He said he loved me, wanted me with him. Now, will you explain this attempt to blacken his name?"

BURGELL touched his lips where her fingers had stung. "There's one thing you'd better understand right now," he said. "I have no reason to lie to you. I only wanted to save you the bother of a long ride to that squawman's place."

She slapped him again, and this time he caught both her hands, his face twisting in a spasm of anger. Suddenly the days of traveling by coach, the searing heat of this July afternoon, the confusion of these past few minutes, caught up with her. She swayed weakly, felt his hard body sustain her weight, heard the sudden concern in his deep voice.

"Why, ma'am! I didn't mean to frighten—"

And then she heard no more.

Some time later she felt cool sheets and heard the voice murmuring, "Sleep a little, sleep a little." She slept. When she finally came awake, it was night. She was in bed, and soft moonlight filtering through an open window revealed the bulky shadows of bedroom furniture.

Then she remembered what had happened and sat up straight. Moonlight fell in a pale shaft across her shoulders, and she gasped. She was wearing a cotton nightgown!

Who had undressed her? There was only Burgell and his little boy at the Landing!

She jumped from the bed, not thinking, in a panic to run away from this place. She stumbled over something, bruised her knee, and finally reached the door. She tugged at the wooden latch and it rose, but the door wouldn't open. It was bolted from outside!

Something broke in her at that point. She cried, cried hard, which she hadn't done since she was a child. For Edith Mowery was no simpering, weakling. In her own environment, Boston, she had been considered a very sensible and self-sufficient young lady.

But this wasn't Boston. This wasn't even civilization, she thought, as she leaned against the door with sobs wracking her body. Finally she calmed down, returned to the bed, and huddled beneath the covers to escape the surprising chill of the Big Bend night.

Her thoughts went back to Boston, where a little more than four years ago she'd met Wallace Byron. He was a handsome man in a stocky, somewhat flashy manner, and there'd been things about him that had made her uncomfortable. He was supposed to be a heavy drinker, but she had that only on hearsay. He was rather glib and, at the beginning, verged on the brink of being overly familiar. But he'd soon declared his love, and asked her to marry him. Her decision had to be given immediately. The night he proposed he'd also announced his intention of going West.

She'd accepted, quieting her doubts by reasoning that any man willing to make his life on the wild frontier must be basically good. It was a romantic notion, grown out of reading too many novels by James Fenimore Cooper. She suspected as much herself, but had buried these suspicions quickly. She didn't want to doubt Wallace; she had begun to hate her life as an orphan, completely dependent on her Uncle Desmond, and she wanted desperately to get away.

But the Civil War broke out and she had had to remain in Boston for four long years. Wallace's letters had been one of her few

pleasures. He had written faithfully, always promising to send for her when the war ended. Then it did end, and his last letter stated that he would expect her on the thirtieth of July.

HE TOLD her to get to El Paso before the twenty-fourth, and informed her about the stage to take to reach Burgell's Landing on the right date. But Edith had decided she would leave Boston and Uncle Desmond immediately, even if it meant spoiling some of Wallace's wedding preparations. She had written him of her decision and left the same day, arriving at the Landing three weeks before the set date.

In the stagecoach, she had worried about this a little, recalling how Wallace's lips had twisted and his eyes had grown narrow and cold on the few occasions when they had disagreed.

Her thoughts ended abruptly as the door to the bedroom suddenly opened. Lamplight blinded her for a moment. She blinked, watched as the lamp was placed on a table, and then her eyes adjusted to the glare. It was Burgell and his little boy who had come in.

"Feeling better?" Burgell asked.

She nodded. Then she asked, "The door was locked. Why?"

"Didn't want you coming downstairs for a while," he said shortly. Then he added, "If you want something to eat you'll have to do your own cooking. My Mexican girl, Manuela, just ran out on me."

Edith caught her breath. "Manuela? Then it wasn't you who—"

He didn't smile as she had half expected. In fact he looked decidedly grim. "No," he said, and walked to the door with his son. "It wasn't me who put you in that nightgown."

"Oh," she said, aware of his coolness. "You didn't mention her before so I thought—" the words trailed off. Then, as he started for the door, she asked, "Mr. Burgell, have you gotten word to Wallace Byron that I'm here?"

He turned, his face composed in neutral lines. "No, and it's going to be some time before I can. Geronimo came out of Mexico a few days ago. While you were asleep the stage you were on came back. Driver and shotgun guard were killed. One of the lieutenants was wounded and the other managed to drive the stage back here. They were ambushed by a large party of Apaches. That's why I locked your door. I didn't want you coming downstairs while I was dressing that lieutenant's wound."

She stared at him, understanding the words but not getting any particular sense of disaster from them. "It's—it's hard to believe," she finally murmured. "But won't the soldiers from Fort Davis soon put an end to that?"

He grinned wryly. "They might if they find out in time. But there could be two or three hundred Chiricahuas raiding the Big Bend right now, and they'll keep a sharp eye on the stage route and all other approaches to Fort Davis. Of course, word will get around sooner or later. But whether it'll be in time to help us, I can't say."

"Raiding the Big Bend!" Edith cried. "Wallace's ranch—"

Burgell shrugged. "No need to worry there. He's blood brother to the Apaches."

"Please don't start that again," Edith whispered intensely. "I refuse to believe it."

"Pa never lies!" The little boy suddenly spoke up, his high-pitched voice piping indignantly. "I saw Mrs. Byron come in the store. She's a real Injun. And I played with her kids, and they was half-breeds."

"Your father told you to say those lies, didn't he?" Edith blazed.

"He did not!" the child said.

Burgell cut him short. "That's enough, Andy. The lady will find out for herself soon enough, if we live through this business." He took the boy by the hand and led him into the hall. "I think you'd better get dressed," he said to Edith. "We'll need every pair of hands to help, if the hostiles hit us."

THEN he was gone, and Edith Mowery was staring dazedly at a closed door, fighting down shame at the way she'd snapped at the child. Too much had happened in too short a time. She was finally beginning to accept Burgell's story of Wallace having married an Indian—or "bought" one, as the tall widower had put it. But even if it were true, she still wanted to see Wallace and hear what he had to say.

She slapped him again, and this time he caught both her hands

It was this latest news that had stunned her. There were Indians nearby, raiding, killing, threatening her own life, if she were to believe Burgell. And the stage had been attacked.

Finding her clothes draped over a chair, she dressed hurriedly and left the room. She was on the second floor of the two-story house, and there seemed to be three other bedrooms here besides the one she'd used. A short flight of rough-hewn plank steps led down to a large room which was fixed up as a general store, complete with shelves, counter and piled trade goods.

Seated on a chair, head in hands, was Lieutenant Saunders, one of the cavalry officers from the stage. On a cot against the wall Lieutenant Bledsoe, the other officer, lay, bandaged around the neck and chest, tossing fitfully and muttering to himself. Burgell hovered over the wounded soldier, and little Andy stood at his side.

"Lieutenant Saunders!" Edith exclaimed "Then it's true about the Indians?"

The man on the chair barely seemed to have heard her. Raising his head, he nodded slowly, his eyes black-ringed and vacant. A second later his head sank back to his chest.

Burgell moved to Edith's side. "Shock. He'll snap out of it. We'll put him upstairs, in Manuela's bedroom. A good night's sleep and he'll be fine." He bent over and said to the dazed soldier, "Follow me, Lieutenant."

The officer obeyed, and Edith watched as Burgell half carried him upstairs. Then something pressed her leg, and she glanced down. It was the little boy, Andy Burgell. He was frightened.

"I'm six years old," he said, trying to puff out his chest.

"Yes," she murmured, touching his dark curls. "Yes, I know."

"I'm not afraid of Indians," he said. "They can't hurt us, can they?"

She felt a sudden ache in her chest, and stooped to the little figure. She put an arm around his shoulders and was startled at his reaction. He clutched her skirt and burst into tears, sobbing out a string of words of which "Mamma" and "'fraid" were all she could catch.

"You mustn't mind him," Burgell said from behind her. "He's missed his ma pretty bad in the last two years. I guess he wants you to comfort him a little. But I'll see that he doesn't bother you any more."

Edith pushed his hand away from the child, pushed it fiercely and angrily. "Leave him alone!" she snapped. "Can't you see he needs to cry it out?"

Burgell straightened. "Yes," he said. "Just wanted to be sure you didn't want us to keep our distance because of our—lies."

Edith dropped her head stroked the crying child's shoulders. "I'm sorry about that, Mr. Burgell. If there are no extenuating circumstances to justify Wallace's behavior, I'll return to Boston on the first stage." But the thought of returning to Uncle Desmond made her stomach lurch. She'd counted so heavily on being her own mistress!

SLOWLY, she raised her eyes to the tall man's. "I am not a prude," she murmured. "If the Indian woman was fully aware that her relationship with Wallace would end when I arrived, I might still marry him. Other men have lived with Indian women out of sheer necessity and later married the women they loved."

Burgell didn't answer for a moment. Then he sighed. "That's true enough, but is it fair to the squaw?"

The little boy was through crying now. Edith stood up, holding his hand. "Nothing is fair about this harsh country, Mr. Burgell. We took the land from the Indians—including that which you call your own. They retaliated by slaughtering white people wherever they could. We then butchered entire Indian villages, which in turn created brutal, implacable enemies like Victorio, Geronimo, and the others. It goes on like that, a vicious cycle. So why try to pick out fair and unfair? As for myself, I've waited four years for a man, and he recently wrote that he still loves and wants me. I intend to try and find a way to consummate those long years of waiting."

Now that she'd said it—worked it out aloud—she felt better. Burgell looked at her, then smiled curiously. "You know a lot, ma'am, and you think straight too. I'd give half I own to make you Andy's ma."

Edith felt the deep flush rise up her neck, suffuse her face, make her very forehead burn. There was something so sincere, so intense in the way Burgell spoke that it made her heart pound wildly. Then she reminded herself of her situation and of Wallace Byron, and she turned away from Burgell.

"You spoke of using every pair of hands," she said. "Just what can I do?"

Burgell nodded slowly, as if confirming a sad suspicion to himself. "First off," he said, "I'll take that wounded lieutenant upstairs where he'll be more comfortable. While I'm doing that you put Andy to sleep in the bedroom near the staircase."

It didn't take Edith long to tuck Andy in bed and hear his prayers. When she returned downstairs, Burgell had already completed his task and was waiting for her.

"Just one favor, ma'am," he said. "My first name is Daniel. My friends call me Dan."

She nodded. "All right, Dan. I'm Edith Mowery."

After that, Dan Burgell showed her how to load the single-shot rifles he had behind the counter. He made her practice until she could do the simple job swiftly and efficiently. Then he showed her the wood-burning stove in the kitchen, and pointed out the food supplies and water he had already stored in safe corners. He explained that she would be responsible for gun loading, feeding, and doctoring, if and when the Apaches decided to pick up the scalps of the two soldiers who had escaped them. Finally, she helped him board up every window in the house except for the two narrow slots facing the road.

It was after midnight when Dan Burgell suggested that it was time they ate. Edith belatedly remembered she hadn't had any food since early afternoon, when the stage had stopped at Fort Quitman. She put up coffee, whipped batter for fluffy pancakes, fried a large portion of side-meat and potatoes. They ate heartily. Edith discovered she was half-starved, and Dan Burgell explained that nothing short of death could injure his appetite, especially when the cooking was this good. Edith found herself unaccountably pleased by this compliment. By the time the meal ended they were laughing together like old friends.

FINALLY Edith put down her cup and shook her head. "Really, Dan," she said, smiling, "I just can't believe there's anyone out there—" she waved her arm—"who wants to hurt us."

He packed a corn-cob pipe and lit it. "You saw the two army officers," he said. "In the morning you can look outside and see the stage near the barn. What other proof do you need?"

She shrugged. "It just doesn't seem real to me, that's all. I keep expecting Wallace to arrive, explain why he's so late, and laugh the whole Indian story away."

Dan Burgell was suddenly very bleak. "Then he does expect you?"

"Yes. I wrote him the day I left Boston. The letter must have preceded me by at least a few days."

"You must love him very much to think that way," Burgell said, his voice dull.

She was fumbling in her mind for an answer, strangely confused, when the front latch rattled. Burgell leaped to his feet, blew out the lamp, and grabbed the rifle he'd kept near his chair.

A voice shouted, "Open up, Burgell! I've come to claim my bride. Hurry up, damn you! Do you think a man who's waited four years wants to stand around outside a closed door?"

Edith jumped from her chair. Wallace Byron, and he'd come just as she'd thought he would! She tried to move forward in the darkness, but Dan Burgell grabbed her arm. "Wait," he whispered, "he might have Chiricahuas with him!"

This time Edith had had enough. "Do you think he'd lead murderous Indians to a place where *I* was staying?" she said. And then, "I understand that white women are scarce out here, Mr. Burgell, but you'll never get another man's intended with your back-stabbing methods!"

Burgell's hand dropped from her arm as if she had burned him. He didn't answer, but she heard him suck in his breath harshly. So her accusation had struck home! Burgell,

the lonely widower, had obviously been trying to turn her against Wallace. The periodicals back home had been full of stories concerning the scarcity of white women on the Western frontier. And yet, there was a dull ache inside her, and something which fought against believing bad of Dan Burgell.

She brushed the feeling aside, found the lamp and lit it. She carried it into the store, set it down, and called out, "Wallace?"

"Edith!" his voice boomed. "Darling, open the door!"

She flung open the door and was swept up by a pair of buskskin-clad arms. Wallace kissed her, and she stiffened. There was about him a rank animal smell blended with heavy fumes of alcohol, and his hands were moving over her body as if she already belonged to him. She pulled back and moved into the room, drawing him into the light after her.

He came in grinning. He was the same tall, darkly-handsome, thick-bodied man she remembered, but there were differences. His grin was now somehow hard, almost vicious. His eyes were narrow and jumpy. His clothing was dirty, the buckskin torn in spots, and there were beaded moccasins on his feet instead of shoes. He'd been drinking.

For one fleeting instant Edith wondered if the changes in his manner were really changes, or if she had never actually known him.

"What's the matter, Edith?" he said, still grinning. "Shocked at the way I'm dressed? Here on the desert frontier there aren't many chances to wear stiff collars and spats!" He put back his head and laughed uproariously. When he had stopped he said more softly, "I'm sorry if I shocked you. But don't let the clothes fool you. I'm the wealthiest man in these parts." Taking her arm possessively, he added, "I'm sorry I'm so late. After I got your letter I intended to meet the stage this morning, but I was detained."

"Geronimo came out of Mexico — and attacked the stage," Dan stated

SHE stopped backing away, but continued to watch him carefully. "Really?" she murmured noncommitally.

His eyes narrowed in that way that had disturbed her back in Boston. "Dan Burgell been talking to you about my squaw?" Her silence answered him, and he sighed. "I have no excuses, Edith. I needed a woman at the ranch, and I also needed some way to stay on friendly terms with the Apaches. Otherwise I could never have survived the Civil War years. The Chiricahuas burned every other place in the area, but they didn't touch mine. But I made it understood that the squaw would have to go when my white woman came from the East. The tribe accepted my terms. I've lived in peace with them, given them beef from my herd when hunting was bad, treated the squaw and children well. But I've never stopped loving you. Now that the raids have ended forever, I can bring you to the ranch as my bride—"

"Close that door, Byron," Dan Burgell snapped. He was standing in the kitchen doorway, his rifle leveled at Wallace's chest.

Wallace smiled grimly, and rubbed the back of his hand across his unshaven cheeks. "No need to point a gun, Burgell. I'm not armed, and even if I were I wouldn't be a threat to you."

"Close that door," Dan repeated, voice falling to a chill monotone.

Wallace shut the door, then turned and grinned again. "Burgell thinks I'm some sort of traitor because I lived with an Indian woman."

Edith swung to Dan, her confusion adding anger to her voice. "If I'm willing to understand, Mr. Burgell, can't you, a man, show some tolerance?"

Dan leaned against the kitchen doorway, keeping Wallace in his sights. "It's not his living with a squaw," he said. "It's the way he's been picking up cash and all sorts of valuables. Like he said, he's the richest man in these parts. I traded with him, and I know."

Wallace smiled. "Sure, I trade with the Indians—peacefully—and so I come into possession of some of the things they get from other traders."

"From corpses, you mean," Dan said.

Wallace's face went hard. "You're crazy," he snapped. "Ever since a broncho Apache killed your wife you've had it in for the whole tribe, and for me."

Dan read the confusion on Edith's face. "A broncho Apache is a wild man—an outlaw in his own tribe, just as a criminal is to us." He swung his eyes back to Wallace Byron. "But Mary was killed by Geronimo's band, and you did business with them. Still are doing business with them."

Wallace looked at Edith. "He's really crazy, honey, at least on the subject of Apaches. He found his wife a few miles from here, when she didn't return from a ride. He never saw the Indians, so how could he know who they were?"

"I can read sign," Dan said. "And Geronimo was seen in the area the same day—at your ranch."

Wallace shrugged, as if to imply that Dan was hopeless. "Let's get out of here," he said to Edith. "I've got a preacher waiting."

DAN chuckled mirthlessly. "Now I'm sure you're acting as point for the Apaches. Singing Pete won't be around for another week yet. And you said that the raids had stopped. Well, either Geronimo or Victorio crossed the Mexican border and hit the Fort Davis stage today. We've got a wounded army officer and his friend upstairs."

Wallace Byron's eyes darted nervously around the room. "Bronchos," he said. "Just a few renegades. Geronimo and Victorio are with Nana, in Old Mexico." He moved to Edith. "Listen, darling, this doesn't concern us. I live at peace with my red neighbors. The squaw has returned to her tribe and the ranch is ready. I'd have preferred waiting a few weeks, but since you're here there's no sense in putting off the marriage. A half-breed preacher is at the ranch, and he'll marry us. This hate-filled maniac is trying to confuse you." He glared at Dan.

Edith looked from one man to the other, and hesitated. Then she remembered the long years of waiting, and decided it wasn't fair to judge her fiance because he'd had a few drinks, was overly eager, and had dressed poorly. As for the squaw, she'd forget that in time, she told herself.

But she didn't want to leave Dan Burgell, his son, and the two army officers, in danger. She moved to Wallace, put her hand on his arm. He smiled triumphantly, his arm going around her waist. Dan Burgell seemed to slump a little, but that might be her imagination, Edith reasoned.

"Wallace," she said, "are you sure there's no danger for Mr. Burgell and his son?"

"Certainly," he said. "I know the Apaches. I'm their blood brother. Those that attacked the stage are bronchos—just a few renegades. Geronimo and the others are in Mexico and they'll stay there." He paused as she still hesitated. "Tell you what," he said, "if it'll make you feel better, I'll send one of my Mexican hands to Fort Davis with a message. A troop of cavalry will be here tomorrow to pick up the two officers and prove to Burgell that he's a frightened old woman."

Edith felt tension drain out of her. It had been a confusing day. Dan Burgell had tried to make her believe her dreams would end in nothing, and he'd been proven wrong. Still, she couldn't help feeling kindly toward him—or was it kindness? She quickly blotted out the question. "Mr. Burgell," she said softly, "please have my trunk brought down."

"We'll pick it up tomorrow," Wallace said, leading her to the door.

"Edith," Dan Burgell said.

She turned and looked at him, saw his lips form words. But then he twisted away, staring into the kitchen. "I'm sorry if I was wrong," he muttered.

Wallace led her out of the house and across the darkened yard to a buckboard and team of horses. He swung her up on the seat and leaped up beside her. And suddenly she was frightened. Little things — half-thoughts — whirled through her mind. Why hadn't Wallace wanted to take her trunk if he had a buckboard? Why had he seemed in such a hurry to get her away from the Landing? Why would Dan Burgell be so unrelenting in his dislike, almost hatred, of Wallace and seem so rational, so kind, in other matters?

"Wallace," she said, "I'd like to go back and say good-by to the officers."

"It's late," he said, and slapped the reins over the horses' backs. He drove toward the road, his head swiveling in the darkness

AND then she was sure something was wrong. A horse whinnied off to the left, another answered from somewhere behind the house, and neither sound was from the vicinity of Burgell's barn. A shrill owl hoot cut the silence, and somehow she knew it was made by a human throat. The air was charged with unseen menace, and she knew instinctively that Wallace was frightened.

Her legs tensed as she subconsciously prepared to jump, or run, or do something. She felt a metal shaft touch her ankle. In the darkness, she reached down and grasped the object—a rifle. Quickly she brought it up, cocked the hammer as Dan had taught her, and prayed that it was loaded.

"What the devil!" Wallace began, but she cut him short.

"Dan was right," she said, her throat dry. "Get back to the house or I'll fire. I mean it!"

At the hysterical note in her voice, he pulled the team to a stop just short of the road. "All right," he whispered. "I knew Geronimo was going to raid again. I couldn't stop him, but I could protect myself as I always have. You showed up at the worst possible time—when I couldn't meet you and head off Burgell's talk. Tomorrow the Apaches would have left the Big Bend for New Mexico, and we could have settled down without your ever knowing about this. But that was spoiled by your jumping the gun, and by Dan Burgell with his rotten talk."

"He was right in everything he said about you," she interrupted. "And he's right to hold you responsible for the death of his wife, because you did have a part in it. You must have had part in many murders, Wallace, so I won't have any compunction in pulling this trigger. Turn the wagon around!"

Despite the bold words, her voice trembled badly. Wallace Byron read the fear that was there.

"Don't be a fool," he said, regaining courage. "They're going to wipe out Burgell's Landing. They want the guns and ammunition he carries in his store, they want those two army men, and they'll kill everyone once they get started. I held them off until I could get you out. Do you want to die in there, Edith, die horribly? Give me that gun." He suddenly lunged toward her, grasping the gun barrel, trying to twist it from her grasp.

She did a lot of thinking in one split second. She thought of Dan Burgell, of the little boy who had hugged her, of the two lieutenants. She also thought of Wallace, trading with the murderous Apaches, knowing their plans and never attempting to warn the other white settlers. Living in peace with the Indians and understanding their grievances was one thing; helping them to butcher innocent families was another. And Dan had said Wallace possessed a great many valuables taken from settlers killed in raids.

"Let go of the gun!" Wallace grunted, struggling with her. "They're all around us."

She pulled the trigger just as he was wresting the stock from her hands. There was a muffled explosion. Wallace coughed and then tumbled headlong off the buckboard seat. Edith grabbed the reins, swung the startled horses around, and galloped them toward the small patch of light that was Dan Burgell's house.

The next few seconds were a nightmare of blurred action and wild sound. A shrill

his scream broke upon her ears, and then the desert was full of terrifying Chiricahua battle cries. Shadows detached themselves from the darkness, racing toward her, and explosions sent whispering lead searching for her life. She kept the buckboard at full tilt toward the light, felt a bullet singe her arm, and leaped off the still-moving vehicle as she passed the door.

The light had gone out but, as she fell in the dust, strong hands gripped her arms and dragged her into the house. The door slammed.

Burgell said, "Get behind the counter and pass me those rifles!"

SHE wanted to lie down and cry; she wanted to wail her fear and horror and deep sickness. But she didn't have time for that. She obeyed Dan Burgell's order, hardly knowing what she was doing, hearing the blast of guns and the screams of savages and the dull pounding of her own heart. It was something out of a newspaper account, something painted in lurid colors in the Sunday supplements, something that Edith Mowery of Boston couldn't possibly be a part of.

It was a bad dream, but she loaded rifles and stumbled through the smoke-filled darkness and handed them to Dan. She took the empties and returned to the counter and fumbled out the cartridges. She loaded and reloaded and heard the voice of Lieutenant Saunders as he came down to help Dan.

Not until the chopping sound, almost lost in the fantastic bedlam, reached her ears, did she come fully awake. She took a loaded rifle, stepped into the black kitchen, peered around. The sound was repeated, and she saw that someone was trying to break in through one of the boarded windows.

She moved quickly, placed the rifle barrel into a small hole already chopped in the wood, pulled the trigger. There was a shrill scream, followed by a dull thud. Calmly she returned to the store and resumed loading. A few minutes later all sound of battle ended abruptly.

"Edith," Dan Burgell called, "are you all right?"

She moved to where he and Lieutenant Saunders were crouched near the narrow, unboarded front windows. "Yes," she said, and was surprised at the steadiness of her voice. "And you, Dan?"

"Fine. How about you, Saunders?"

"Not a scratch," the young lieutenant said. "Think they'll try again?"

"Don't know," Dan muttered. "They're always unpredictable. But the fact that they're attacking at night shows they're really after something. They must have been told about my stores of rifles and ammunition." He paused. "Wallace Byron, I figure."

"Yes," Edith said. "But he's dead. I shot—"

She didn't get to finish. There was a shriek of pure terror, and then Wallace Byron's voice was shouting, "Edith, for the love of God, tell Burgell to throw out the ammunition and rifles! Please, Edith! They're holding me responsible. They'll kill me if you don't give them what they need."

Edith gasped. "He's alive!"

"Yes," Dan said softly. "But not for long. Indians have a fine contempt for traitors—even those who work on their side. They know the difference between a genuine friend—like General Cook, who's fighting Washington to get them a decent reservation area—and a man who uses them to line his own pockets. Byron is going to find out the price of being a renegade, because I won't give the Apaches the means to butcher the entire Big Bend. I'll blow up the house before I do that!"

"You're right," Lieutenant Saunders muttered. "If they're short of ammunition they'll have to withdraw across the border." He chuckled drily. "After they force us to go up in a blaze of glory."

"But what about Andy?" Edith whispered, the full horror of their situation coming home to her. "Your own child!"

"Thousands of other children might die if the Apaches get our guns and ammunition," Dan replied quietly.

THERE was nothing more to be said. It was the perfect answer. It was an answer that only a Wallace Byron couldn't understand. So they waited in the darkness,

and after a moment or so Edith felt Dan's hand enfold hers. It was a strong, gentle hand, and it brought a great deal of comfort.

"One thing Byron had straight," he murmured into her ear. "He knew that I coveted his woman." His lips brushed her cheek.

"Edith," Wallace Byron shrilled, "hurry! They say you can keep a few weapons for yourselves, but the rest must be thrown into the yard."

Dan took a deep breath, then called back, "There'll be nothing thrown into the yard, Byron. We'll blow up the place if we have to."

There was a sudden burst of voices from outside, and Wallace Byron shouted, "No, blood brothers, the man lies! They will give you—"

His words choked off and were followed by the worst sound Edith had ever heard. It was a bubbling cry of ultimate agony, and it continued for a full fifteen minutes. She covered her ears with her hands, sobbed wildly, and then felt a small, warm figure blunder into her. She stopped crying, held little Andy tightly, gave him the comfort she herself wanted. She told him there was nothing to worry about, that they'd all be safe, that she'd be his mother and never leave him.

When the bubbling scream stopped, horses pounded out into the desert, and then all was silent.

They waited until daybreak, and saw nothing—nothing but the terrible figure of Wallace Byron lying like a discarded bundle of old clothes near the road. Dan crept outside for a cautious reconnoiter of the area. Byron had been horribly mutilated, and scalped. He'd died under agonizing torture. The bullet wound that Edith had put in his side was minor, a flesh wound. He'd have recovered from that easily enough, if his blood brothers hadn't intervened.

Later, Dan crawled farther out, as far as the small rise beyond the road. When he returned he explained to Edith that nothing could hide in the flat desert around them and not be seen. There was no sign of hostiles.

Nevertheless, he and Edith and the lieutenant waited until the next morning, sleeping fitfully beside the unboarded windows. Then they heard the horses and once again crouched grimly over their rifles.

But it was the Fort Davis stage, fulfilling its once-every-two-days schedule. The driver and guard were accompanied by a troop of cavalry. News of the Chiricahua raids had reached Fort Quitman.

Later, after Lieutenant Saunders had left with his wounded companion, and the captain commanding the troop of cavalry had assured Dan that the area was clear, Dan and little Andy sat down at the table for the meal Edith had prepared. The three of them ate quietly and then Andy got up and moved to Edith's chair.

"You told me you would stay here always," he said, looking up at her with big brown eyes just like Dan's. "You said you'd be my mom."

She nodded, eyes lowered. "Yes, that's what I said."

Andy squealed delightedly and kissed her. "Then it's all right," he shouted, " 'cause you wouldn't lie!"

Dan shooed him into the yard to play, lit his pipe, cleared his throat. "When it looks like the end," he began softly, "people say things—"

"Mr. Burgell," Edith interrupted briskly, "are you trying to break the agreement I made with Andy?"

His eyes flew to hers, startled. He saw the warm smile on her face, got up and came around the table. When Andy looked in a moment later, they were kissing. He gave them ten minutes, and came back.

"Heck," he said. "Won't they ever stop?"

Next Issue Reviews

BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK

MGM Hit with Spencer Tracy

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Next Issue Interviews

JEAN SIMMONS

An Illustrated Personality Sketch

Rustler's Stamp

a fact story by Murray T. Pringle

NICK NORADES had a penchant for making off with other folks' cattle. In fact, he was so good at accumulating "bovine boodle" that by 1887 he had no fewer than five sheriffs dogging his trail. But the fact that five states had posted a bounty on his head bothered rustler Norades not one whit. He boasted to everyone who bothered to listen that he respected no law on earth.

And, unlike most of his contemporaries, Nick possessed a smattering of legal knowledge. It was this knowledge, coupled with Nick's unorthodox use of it, that once saved the cow thief from having his neck stretched. In September 1887, Deputy Sheriff Myron Osborne caught up with the long-sought rustler. He not only caught up with him, he even found the rustler with three stolen cows and a hot branding iron in his hand.

"Well, Norades," said Deputy Osborne, training his gun on the thief, "I've got you at last. Reckon after I take a peek at your herd I should find enough evidence to hang you."

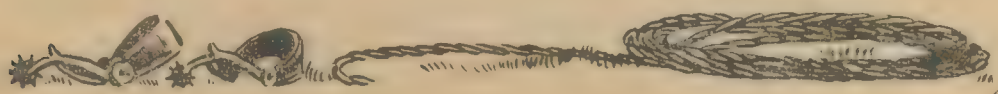
Nick was considerably chagrined—but not for long. Glowering at the lawman, he dug a hand into the pocket of his jeans and whipped out three postage stamps. He glued them to the sides of the rustled beeves and stepped back triumphantly.

"Those cows are now the property of the U. S. Government and you dassen't touch 'em!" he announced smugly.

Deputy Osborne, unsure of the legal aspects of this strange action, took the crook's word for it that the cows were now entrusted to the U. S. Mails, and regretfully let him go. Norades's freedom was short-lived, however. Not much later the outlaw was again captured, and was fastened to a tree by his neck.

In his pockets his captors and executioners found several postage stamps. Recalling the episode in which the rustler had hoodwinked Deputy Osborne, one of them suggested gluing the stamps to Norades's hide as a bit of poetic justice. Another vetoed the suggestion.

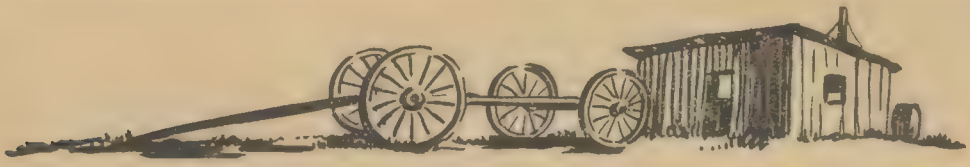
"Nope," said the objector, "'twould be a waste. Where this hombre has gone paper doesn't last long!"



WILL HAD DREAMED of his own ranch for seventeen years . . . and sometimes a man can get mighty stubborn about a dream . . .

The

It was good to know that Martha wanted him, whatever happened . . .



Hard-Headed Groom

By D. S. HALACY, JR.

WILL COLLINS felt out of place in the Alston parlor with Martha, like a cow in a henhouse. But when a man is twenty-seven it's time to face up to facts. He'd just have to get used to something besides a soddy or a bunkhouse, because a wife would want a place of her own to live in. Especially Martha.

To Will's eyes, at least, she was the prettiest thing in calico between Perristown and the county seat, and he still couldn't figure why she was willing to have him. She was tiny, maybe weighing a hundred and ten pounds, and that in three or four petticoats and button shoes. But there was a look to her blue eyes and a tilt to her head that had made him decide a year ago he'd ridden the other fellow's herd about long enough.

"I figure with help I can put us up a house on the place in a couple of months, Marty," he said, wishing his Adam's apple didn't get agitated each time he looked at her. "There's a well and—"

"The old Beechey place is vacant," the girl said. "We could live in town."

Will laughed. "I'm not much for fences, Marty. And when a man has three hundred and twenty acres of his own—" He trailed off proudly, squeezing the big knuckles of one hand until they popped. The odd look in her eyes surprised him, but he figured she was aiming to make it easy on him.

"Trissa and Matt have a place in town," Martha said. "Will, I want to talk to you about our plans." There was a trace of a frown now.

Will grinned. "You'll have company! Folks don't get married every day." He stood up, reaching for his hat that had taken up the part of the horse-hair sofa between them. "We can talk some more going to the dance, if you don't mind riding a spring wagon, that is."

"I'd walk," she said eagerly, "to go with you, Will." She moved closer to him and her hands caught his free one. Her eyes were shining again, with that mysterious softness he felt in her hands. He swallowed, thinking of sitting beside her on the seat of the wagon tonight.

He wanted to kiss her at the door, but her mother was watching

from the bedroom window. He decided he could wait until the dance. So he just waved as he went down the walk to the street.

The sun was a reddish ball, half swallowed by the mountains forty miles the other side of the rangeland. It was October but not yet too cool, and the sunset gave a warm glow to the shadows, even to the dust raised by the buggy coming down the road.

He pushed open the gate, wincing at the shrill creak. Clayt Alston wasn't much of a hand about a house, but he had done a fine job on his daughters! Will lifted the reins from the fence picket and got a foot into the stirrup. He swung up and, when he looked back at the white frame house, Martha was waving from the porch. The sun glared an orange dazzle off most of the windows, but he was sure her mother was watching, too.

Glancing back at the approaching buggy, Will nudged the chestnut he'd broken four years ago. Filling his nostrils with the smell of new hay and his lungs with crisp air, he smiled. He was a happy man. There was a round-up coming, and this time he was going to cut out fifty head of Angus and drive them to the section that he had filed on. There was enough hay for the winter, and next year he'd ship beef himself, and have money to buy Martha the clothes to do her justice. Or, and he laughed a little embarrassedly, things for the baby they might soon be expecting.

He didn't push the horse. There was plenty of time for the shave he wanted, and for gabbing with the other hands who were in town. Hearing the trotter coming up on him, Will moved over, then looked back to see Matt Lace and his wife waving to him from the buggy.

GRINNING, Will pulled at his Stetson, then reined up as the big man stopped the trotter. A swirl of dust caught them, and Matt Lace swore so violently that Trissa colored. She was bigger than Martha, they didn't seem sisters, even. She had made a catch. Will had punched cattle for Lace for the last four years, watching the rancher fan out until he numbered his herds in the thousands of heads, and men who had called him Matt changed it to Mr. Lace.

"Evening, Will," Matt said now. There was a genial smile leaving his oval face, crinkling the soft leather of it. A man as big as Lace could afford to smile most of the time. But there had been times when lesser men had been shocked to see how fast his softness could turn to steel. "We hear congratulations are in order."

"Evening, boss," Will said. "Evening, Mrs. Lace." He had never called Martha's sister by her first name and he probably never would. "And thank you. I'm looking forward to marrying Marty, all right."

"Why not?" Lace demanded jovially. "She'll make you a fine wife, son. Say"—he reached into the pocket of his broadcloth coat off-handedly, as though the thought had just come to him—"here's a little advance wedding present for you and Martha." He leaned across his wife to hand the envelope to Will.

Then Lace clucked to the trotter, lifted his hand to Will, and slapped down with the reins. Turning his head against the dust, Will squinted at the sealed envelope that bore his name in Lace's flowing script. "I'll be damned," he said softly. He hadn't counted on anything from Lace.

Carefully he tore the flap, blew on the envelope to spread its sides, and lifted out the paper inside. As he unfolded the letter, frowning, he had to grab at a crisp sheaf of heavier paper. In what was left of the daylight, he saw that it was a check. Matt Lace had given him a check! Then, as he read the letter, the grin faded as fast as it came.

"Dear Will Collins:
The enclosed check, with its explanatory notation, ought to help smooth some of the chuck holes on the road of matrimony. Also, as of November, your salary will be increased to forty-five a month. Best to you and Martha,
Matt Lace."

Will swore, flipping the check over with his thumb. On the back, lettered neatly in fine print, were the words: "Payment in full for fifty head Angus cattle."

The sun was gone now, and the coolness rushed in with the dark. Shoving the letter

and check into his shirt pocket, Will spurred the chestnut, in a hurry now. Anger burned in him like forge coal as he read the intent that was plain in the "present" from his boss.

The fifty cattle were those he had bought from Lace last year, the start of his own herd. And the sum was just a dollar a head more than what Will had paid for them then! Who was the fool, he or Lace? Did the big man think Will had been joshing when he spoke of running his own place after this round-up?

It was a short ride to the center of town, but in that distance his rage grew until he could feel it tight in his face and bristling up his back. He might have known. He had suspected long ago that it was going too well. It was no gift; he rated the raise Lace was offering. It was a command. And Will Collins was through with commands.

HE RODE past the barber shop, paying no heed to the yells from riders he knew. At the courthouse he swung down, leaving the horse by the trough. Taking the steps at a run, he walked swiftly down the hall, boots loud and hollow on the dry boards. He caught the knob on the door under the judge's sign, shouldering the panels and fetching up hard.

Swearing, he rattled the knob, calling out the judge's name.

"The Marshal took the Judge over to the County Seat right after lunch." Will turned to see the old swamper, his bearded face shining back of the lamp he carried. "That you, Collins? Hee, hee!" The old man laughed like a silly woman. "Come for a license for that there double collar? Reckon I'd be champing at the bit too if I were a young buck like you."

"The sheriff in?" Will snapped. Another time he'd have laughed with the old coot, but tonight he had no spirit for it. "Never mind, Pop, I'll look for myself." He turned away from the giggling swamper.

Clayt Alston sat back of the warped table that did him for a desk, one hand clutching a crumple of newspaper, the other wrapped around a cup of coffee. Will would have wagered the coffee was as cold as the pipe the sheriff had clamped between yellowed teeth.

Alston looked up over gold-rimmed glasses, a quick smile making him ten years younger than the gray at his temples and curling around his ears. Martha's father had been the law in Perristown for five years. It was a safe job, some of the uncharitable said. He was, Will knew, a cautious man.

"Good evening, son," Alston said, and then he saw the anger in Will's face. "Or is it, now?"

"Depends," Will said, hauling the wedding present from Lace out of his pocket. "Depends where you're sitting, I reckon." He slammed the letter and the check down for the sheriff to read, and rested his weight on one corner of the table.

"Hmmm," Alston said judicially, one hand steadying the coffee cup that bounced with Will's weight on the spraddle-legged table. "Hmmm."

"You can do better than that, Clayt," Will said when the old man had finished. "I bought those cows fair and square. I aim to cut them out, come round-up."

Alston said "Hmmm," again and sucked on his teeth. Then he took off his glasses and polished them with a piece of newsprint. "Forty-five a month isn't bad, son. I get just sixty here. Judge doesn't make more than that."

"I hear different," Will said hotly. "Counting the retainer Matt Lace pays the judge for looking after Matt's interests, it'll hit near a hundred. Besides, I don't care what the judge makes. I figure to run my own outfit. I need these fifty cows!" He jabbed a finger at the check for emphasis.

"Man could do worse than ramrod for Mr. Lace," the sheriff said mildly. "Sit down, boy. You're twitching like a bull's tail in fly time."

"What I want to find out is, how do I let him know I don't want his money? Do I send this check back to him, or what?" The sudden realization came to Will that Lace might forge Will's signature and then claim the check as a receipt. "I'll tear it up in his face. He can't threaten me!"

"Easy," Alston said. "He isn't doing that. Look, Will, Marty isn't marrying you for fifty cows, Angus or whatever."

It came back to Will then, the look that had put wrinkles above Marty's eyes where none should have been. Did she know? Was that what she meant about talking over their plans?

YOUNG married feller could do a lot with better'n a thousand in the bank, and a good job to boot. That place of Clinton Beechey's is up for sale, Will."

"You and Marty gone into real estate, Clayt?" Will asked bitterly. "Sounds like the family's been talking it all over. Right nice of you to include me, before I got any too-big ideas."

"Aww, son!" Clayt got up, put a hand on Will's shoulder placatingly. "You're taking it all wrong. Ranching's a gamble. Remember Ray Bonney? Burnt out the first year. And Beechey, he lost everything to the bank. Would have paid him to cut his cows' throats the year he got 'em!"

Will shrugged free. "Like I told you, Clayt," he said evenly, "I don't give a hang for the other man. I'll think for Will Collins—always have since the old man cashed in when I was ten."

"Sure you have," Clayt said. There was a crafty look in his eyes now. "But you got Martha to think about now. I don't want her hurt—or you either, Will. That's the whole thing. We don't want to see you hurt yourself."

That was the way the wind blew. Will could smell it now. Without a word he scooped up the letter and the check from Lace, replaced them in his shirt pocket, and buttoned it down.

"Tell Marty I'll be by at eight," he said then. "We got more to talk about than I figured."

He might as well have dropped his money through the broad cracks in the floor for all the good the liquor did him. Squeezed in between two other Lace punchers with an hour's start on him, he glared at himself morosely in the bar mirror. Was it seventeen years that he had the notion in the back of his mind to work for Will Collins? All the broncs he'd fought hadn't knocked it out of him, and he hadn't fought blizzards and wolves just for the privilege of doing it again every year of his life.

Someone slapped him roughly on the back. "Getting hitched, eh, cowboy?" It was meant as a taunt, but there was envy tinging the rider's words. They all laughed, but it was as much to salve themselves as to hurt him.

"Yeah," Will said. "Drink up on me." He slammed his palm down hard on the bar and called for a bottle of good whisky. But when it was gone, he still looked the same in the mirror.

Lace was smart. If he'd pulled this six months ago Will would have hit the ceiling, two guns and both spurs going. But now, with the wedding planned, and Marty to sweet talk him, it was different. Her old man was in on it too. Yes, Matt Lace was shrewd. He must have had it all planned a year back even, when Will asked to buy the beef Lace was getting rid of.

By saying yes, Lace had gotten a bonus of work out of Will. He'd gotten his price for the cattle too. And now that he had decided he didn't want competition this close at hand, he was making his move.

Down the bar a puncher yelled something about the dance, and a trio of staggering riders made for the door, waving a bottle. Will lifted his eyes to the big clock on the wall of the saloon. It was five to eight. He swore suddenly, lifting a hand to scrape at the stubble of beard he'd meant to leave with the barber before he went to get Marty for the dance.

Shrugging, he drained the glass before him and left the bar. A beard, one way or another, would make little difference now. Outside, he mounted the chestnut and rode rigidly to the livery stable. The liquor, bypassing his head, seemed to have thickened his arms and legs, and his motions were exaggerated enough so that Marty would notice.

She wouldn't like that; but then she also wouldn't like something else he was going to tell her.

HE STOOD on the porch solemnly, nodding to Clayt and Mrs. Alston who stood in back of Marty.

"Have a good time, you two," the sheriff said, thumbs in his vest. The star was still there, as though he got paid by the hour for wearing it.

"Sure," Will said, "we will." The bitterness in his voice surprised him, and Marty looked up puzzled as they went out to the wagon.

"Go ahead," Will said, when he had helped her up. He climbed onto the seat and gathered the reins. "I've been down to the Paradise instead of shaving." He turned,

moved his face closer so she could see and smell the evidence.

"I don't mind, Will," she said in a small voice. There was the muffled clopping of hooves from the team as they moved down the street between the rows of houses. One house was dark, the Beechey place, and Marty turned her head slowly, watching it as they went by.

"A man needs his recreation," she said after a bit. "I wouldn't try to tell you what to do."

Will snorted, wondering if it were the liquor or his anger. "Just so I do it without your having to tell me, is that it, Marty?"

He thought she gasped, but he couldn't be sure. They rode in silence until the team turned onto Main Street, in sight now of the schoolhouse.

"Your brother-in-law made me a wedding present this evening," he said at length. There was a foot of seat between them, a space that had never been there before. But he couldn't bring himself to move closer. "Better than a thousand dollars," he went on, "and a raise in pay to boot."

"Oh, Will," Marty said, "that's wonderful!" It was as though she had carefully rehearsed it, said it over and over to herself before.

"Sure," he told her stiffly. "And now I won't have to worry about those fifty Angus, either."

"Will," she said, and it seemed she moved a little closer, "I didn't aim to marry you for the cattle."

"It's a comforting thought," Will said. "I'm hearing it all over town. In fact I'm getting a lot of things last, seems to me. Matt Lace talk to you about me staying on with him?" They were getting down to bedrock now.

"Will!"

"Did he?" Will repeated, louder this time. They were nearly to the school, and he could hear the squeak of the old swamper's fiddle, and the raucous calling of Little Joe, the barber.

"No," Marty said, so low he had to bend to hear. "Trissa did."

"Damnation," Will said. "Everybody looking out for me, and that's a fact."

The team turned into the schoolyard, and he eased them into an empty spot. Marty sat up straight, looking right in front of her, and she was breathing deep.

Will was remembering the softness of her, the way her mouth was on his that last time he'd taken her to the dance. It would have been easy to pull her to him, let the perfume smell of her mix him up the way no liquor could. He did love her; he did want to marry her. And he had sworn to his old man the name of Collins wouldn't die with him.

This was the girl he wanted for his wife and the mother of his children.

THERE was all that going through his mind. Forty-five a month and, maybe, if he kept his nose clean, a bonus come round-up. Maybe Marty was right—she and her dad, and her sister and brother-in-law. Maybe Will Collins was the off-breed, the throwback to something that had gone out of style, like buffalo hunting and longhorn cattle.

At last he swung down from the wagon, walked round back of it, and reached his arms up for her. "We came to dance, Marty. Let's go on in and make a show." But it took all his pride to let her go when her feet touched the ground, to take his hands from her slim waist and walk stolidly alongside her into the back door of the school.

There was a Paul Jones, and he watched her dance away with a beefy cowboy from the county seat. Then, for a while, his brain whirled as fast as the dancers, and he forced a thin smile to his face and kept it there. The drinks in the Paradise were catching up with him now.

Mopping his face, he sought for Marty when the dance was done, the frozen smile going when he saw her talking to Matt and Trissa. His hand went almost by itself to his shirt pocket, crackling the papers inside. Maybe it was just as well, he told himself, walking stiffly toward the three standing alongside the punch bowl.

"Howdy, Will," Matt Lace said, putting out a hand. He had changed to a suit of light checkered material, and his gray silk vest sparkled with the heavy gold chain looped across it. Trissa wore a gown of heavy blue taffeta that rustled starchily as she moved closer to Will.

"I suppose you and I'll be some sort of relatives, come the wedding," Lace said. "Maybe second cousins, once removed." He laughed comfortably, shaking all over with his own good humor, and reached over to cup his hand under Martha's chin.

"Sure, boss," Will said. "Maybe even kissing cousins, the way everybody's working for me." He saw the smile leave Lace's face, watched the big man brace himself. Then he took out the letter and the check.

"I can't accept your wedding gift, though," he said evenly. "I'm not married yet; maybe Marty won't have me. Better take it back."

"Marty'll have you, Will," Matt Lace said. "Marty is a smart girl, like her sister. She comes from a smart family." He had himself under control, even smiling faintly again.

"What have you got against my raising cattle?" Will asked suddenly. "Afraid of the competition?"

"What?" Lace shook with laughter now. There was a little knot of dancers collecting around them, keeping a respectful distance from Lace, and yet close enough to see all the fun. "Competition from you Collins? You're pulling my leg, man! You're a good foreman, but don't let a swelled head make you too big for those britches, boy."

A titter ran through the crowd, and Lace looked around him to see his audience. He liked it. Martha had moved close to Will now, and he was surprised to feel her hands on his arm.

"Will," she whispered close to his ear. "stop it, please. You're drunk."

He brushed her off with the hand that held the present from Lace.

"Don't you get too big for your own pants, Matt," he said coldly. "Sitting back of a desk doesn't slim a man down none."

There was laughter in the eyes of the crowd back of Lace, but you couldn't hear it. Lace wasn't laughing now.

"I said I don't want your check," Will went on. "And the raise won't do me any good, since I won't be ramrodding for you in November."

He had to give his boss credit. Matt kept the anger off his face. In fact, he made himself smile. Spreading his hands, he shrugged, making the gesture broad and good-natured.

"You drive a hard bargain, Will," he said. "What do you want, twenty-three dollars a head?" His eyes narrowed. "Twenty-five? That's better than twenty dollars a month your money's made for you. Think, man."

SOMEONE in the crowd wistled thinly. Twenty-five would mean a check for twelve hundred and fifty dollars. Maybe he was being a fool.

"I don't want your money, Lace," he said. "I want those cows." Will ripped the check to shreds, along with the letter Lace had written, and let the paper flutter to the floor at his boss's feet.

There was a silence then, until the fiddle ripped it wide.

"Square 'em up," Little Joe yelled. He was too far back to see what was going on between Will and Matt Lace, or maybe he had seen and was trying to smooth it over.

The veins running down the side of Lace's head, just in front of his ears, swelled, and color came into his face. But he kept his voice even. The threat was in his words, not the tone or his looks.

"It's your choice, cowboy," he said. "Better be sure."

Will turned to Marty then, not nearly as sure as he ought to be. The lift of the liquor was gone, almost before he'd felt it, and now he felt weak and tired and sick to his stomach.

"I'm not up to any more dancing," he said to the girl he had planned to kiss tonight, and marry shortly. "You coming with me or staying on?" He didn't want that harshness in his voice, but he couldn't keep it out. It was a surprise when Marty nodded her head and came toward him.

"You can take me home, Will," she said, her voice small and without the lightness that he liked so much. She was pale as she nodded a goodnight to her sister and Matt Lace. Then she walked with Will out into the dark of the schoolyard.

You couldn't figure a woman, that was for sure. If she'd told him to go jump in the Little Blue Will would have felt better, known how to act. But her coming along with him, after the way he'd acted inside, confused him. Now he didn't know whether to cuss or to go hide.

"I'm sorry, Will," Marty said, "so sorry I hurt inside." She seemed tiny, huddled in the darkness on the wagon. "I know how you feel. I—I guess it just takes less to make me happy. All I need is you, Will."

Driving her home, he felt like a calf-killing dog. Once he started to say something, but he didn't do much good, partly because he wasn't sure just what he was going to say. Besides, there was something in his chest and throat, clogging the words as fast as he could think them.

He didn't walk her to the porch, because a lamp still glowed in the parlor and he knew Clayt and Mrs. Alston were up. There was nothing for him to say to Marty anyhow.

"Goodnight, Will," she said, the strain in her voice telling him she was having the same trouble with her words as he was. "Think about it, will you please? Sleep on it?" And then she was gone, leaving him at the gate.

He did think about it, all the way to the livery stable to pick up the chestnut, and all the long drive out to his section. He thought about it in every possible way. But he didn't get to sleep on it, because there was a committee waiting for him at his soddy.

He could see the light from a quarter-mile off, and it wrinkled his forehead some. But now and again some puncher stopped for the night, and he didn't worry much about it. He had figured to water the wagon team and his chestnut, then turn them out to pasture. But there were three horses standing by his shack, and he let the chores wait.

DROPPING from the wagon, he moved fast for the soddy. The horses hadn't been there long, and they'd come in a hurry, from the way they heaved. Will had little use for a sixgun, but he felt naked when he moved up to the door and saw the three men inside, each packing a gun as though the weight of it didn't bother him any.

"Make yourself at home," Will said, not too sarcastically. He recognized one man, a beefy puncher from the county seat—Briscoe, he thought the man's name was.

They'd stoked up a fire in the little stove, and one of the others grinned and reached for the coffee pot. "Right neighborly," he said. "We're doing just that. For a cattle baron, though, you're real shy of cups, mister."

It hit Will then, like a gourdful of spring water in the face. This was a committee, and he knew who had sent them.

"Yeah," the other man said. He was squatting on his boots, and he swiped his

mouth with the back of his hand and passed Will's enamelware cup to the man at the stove. "I'm a mite disappointed, Collins. Figured a man of your importance'd have quite a spread."

"Trail on back to the dance, then," Will said. His head was clear now, the last of the liquor numbness gone with the realization of what was coming. "Three comical galoots like you should be the life of the party."

Briscoe laughed, taking the cup from the man with the coffee pot.

"Ease up now, Collins," he said. "You need a cup of coffee to sober you up." He passed the cup toward Will, handle out. The gesture threw Will off, and he reached for it

With a quick toss, Briscoe flung the coffee full in Will's face. The scalding liquid burned and blinded, and he swore, dropping back a step and rubbing at his eyes. Then something smashed into his stomach and he gasped, dropped his hands protectively. He still couldn't see, and the fist came out of nowhere, hard on the side of his face, and drove him back over his bunk.

Half conscious, he felt himself dragged to his feet, a man on each side pinning his arms. By now his eyes had cleared enough so that he could see Briscoe's fat face blurring a foot away. The man's voice cut through the ringing in Will's ears.

"We don't like trouble makers, Collins," he said. "Fact is, we get paid to see there isn't any more trouble."

Will's chin sagged, touching his neckerchief. Briscoe's open palm smashed the side of his face. Then he hit the other side of Will's face with the back of his hand, knuckles hard and bruising.

"You listen to me!" he snapped. "You can tally two and two. Get smart and you'll stay alive. Understand?"

"Go—to—hell." Will forced the words out through puffing lips, and fists slammed into him from both sides at once. He thought he was too sick to be scared, but when he saw the gun in Briscoe's hand, six inches from his mouth, he was scared, so scared he'd have begged them not to kill him, if he could have opened his mouth.

But it wasn't a bullet that hit him. Briscoe swung the gun once, just as the two men holding Will let go. It caught him on the side of the face, paining as though he'd been struck with a shovel. His feet tangled and he went down, hitting the stove and crying out as it seared him. Then he was lying on his back, not caring about anything any more.

He couldn't see, and he could hear only faintly. Soemone was jesting about Will's fancy shirt, and he felt something spatter his chest like sparks of fire. Something struck him on the shoulder, clattered on the floor beside him, and then he didn't hear any more.

FOR a long time after he came to he lay on the floor, staring up at the stove pipe that had broken apart at the joint. Finally he got it figured out, remembering slowly what had happened. The coffee pot lay beside him on the floor, where they had flung it at him. Reaching out a hand, he felt that the stove was cold, and the light coming in the soddy door told him it was near noon.

His face felt smashed, and there was dried blood caking it. His mouth tasted coppery, and he was afraid to look in the mirror when he hauled himself up. The movement brought a catch to his chest and right side, and he swore softly, tears of pain coming. The waterbucket was still half full, and he bent over it, sloshing his face with water in spite of the hurt.

After a while he got a towel and dried himself, seeing the fresh blood he had started. Then he got up enough nerve to go to the mirror that hung above the cot. It wasn't as bad as it felt. It couldn't have been. But the right side of his face was gashed, and his lips still ballooned. He was moving his jaw, trying to decide if it were cracked, when he noticed the check reflected in the mirror. His head was clear enough now so that it didn't surprise him much to find the rectangle of paper on his table, weighed with his one cup, a ring of dried coffee marking it.

He swore aloud once, and then swore again with the pain the first movement had caused

him. Lace hadn't lost any time hitting back. The rancher had picked men from some distance away, and that was clever. Will could go back to work for his boss and nobody would be the wiser. It was damn decent of Lace. And he'd cut the purchase price too. The figure stood now at just what Will had paid for the stock a year back.

For a long time he sat there on the bench, looking down at the check that had Matt Lace's neat, flourished signature at its bottom. It was nice and legal, pretty as could be. While Will stared, anger coursed through his aching body like venom, making him stiffen with its poison. He turned the check over after a while, blinked, and then carefully folded it up and put it in his pocket.

When a man got as powerful and cocky as Lace, there was one thing a man like Will Collins could do about it. The anger drained out of him slowly, and then there was just the deep, hurting sadness about Marty. A man hates to be forced, even by the girl he loves.

At the ranch, it was as though every man made it a point not to see the marks on his face. He said nothing. Neither did they. In the week before the drive Lace spoke to him only once, and then his expression betrayed nothing. The big-britches cowhand had learned his lesson. That was the way Lace wanted it, to have Will jump when he said jump.

There were a dozen men Lace could have picked for wagon boss of the round-up that would be better than the man he called in. Will Collins was one. But the big rancher had a special reason for his choice of someone else. Will had been to the bank with the check; and Lace, with his man beat down, was going to rub his nose in it for good measure. The boss of the fall drive was to be Slade Briscoe, the man who'd beaten Will.

It wasn't easy, but Will Collins made himself grin and take it. And that day he went in and bought the old Beechey place in town. He stopped off at the Alston house on his way back, and had the long-delayed talk with Marty, too.

He was having trouble keeping his eyes off his boots, but he got out his little speech.

"Marty," he said, "you still agreeable to marrying a cowpuncher with all his pride in his back Levi pocket?"

"I'll marry you, whatever, Will," she said for answer, and there were tears ready to come. She kissed him then, on the mouth and real hard, and he figured you couldn't ever tell about a girl. But she didn't know about the Beechey place, she couldn't know that. And at that it was sort of comforting to know Marty wanted him, like she said, whatever — coward, cattleman, or cowpuncher.

THE drive was like a dozen he had worked. Briscoe saw to it that Will made the greasy sack detail, going way north for a small bunch that had drifted into rough, couleed country. But that was all right. The gawky kid Will was paired with squalled all night about the dirty end of the stick, but Will held his tongue.

And finally they had the gather, and brought them in one great moving carpet of dusty beef toward the bunch ground. Will bedded down on the edge of the quiet herd, in a clump of scrub oak. Smoking a last cigarette, he lay looking at the dipper resting low on the horizon. The stars, now, he thought, were something a man could count on. He went to sleep thinking that.

Matt Lace was at the chuck wagon in the morning, which was no surprise. Most of the cattle were his. The only sizable lot that weren't were feeder stock Briscoe would be cutting out for the owner.

Will was squatting at breakfast, spearing the last of a good batch of hotcakes. He saw the shadow over him and looked up at his boss.

"Another year, Collins," Lace said cheerfully. "A good year, too. You had me disturbed a while back, but I think we understand each other now. Right?" He smiled down at Will, the smile of a man who has everything in order, and is pleased by it.

"Right," Will echoed. Over on the other side of the wagon he could see Clayt Alston, the star flashing like a piece of mirror in the morning sun. That was a surprise. He had figured the sheriff would keep clean

away, if for nothing else then to keep from rubbing it in to Will.

There was just one more party needed now, and he wasn't long coming. Will was still squatting when Briscoe rode up on a wiry black.

"Get off your hams, Collins," he said loudly, making sure everybody within ten rods could hear his command. He was still the boss, and Will got up. What he did next came as a surprise to everyone.

One hand caught the round-up boss by the gunbelt; the other slapped the jumpy horse in the ribs. Briscoe came out of the saddle like a bale of hay topping out of the loft. Will got clear to let him get up, then drove a fist into the rider's face, all his hundred and seventy pounds and the sum of his bitterness behind it.

And when Briscoe clawed to his hands and knees and staggered half erect, Will caught his head and smashed it down on an upraised knee. The rider would be a hard-looking hombre for some time to come.

It had taken about half a minute, and Matt Lace stood with his mouth dropped open as if he were going to say something. Will beat him to it.

"I figure he was about to prod me to start cutting, Lace," he said. "So I'll be getting to work on my fifty." He swung onto his own chestnut then, leaving the man he had worked for till now still without a word. Slapping a hand to the gun at his hip, Will yelled back at Lace. "These aren't blanks in here today, either. Don't get in my way!"

AS WILL went by, Clayt Alston was white as the shirt his wife had starched for him. He was even whiter when Will drove the first of his fifty head out.

There were about two dozen men watching, and all but one or two knew what Will was doing. Matt Lace bawled at his riders to stop Will, but nobody moved. They wouldn't help Will, but they weren't eager to eat lead either.

Will had half a dozen head cut out and standing patiently in the thin shade of the scrub oak, when it happened. Matt Lace began to fan his hat.

Will swore, knowing he couldn't shoot the rancher. There was nothing he could do but swear, and watch Clayt Alston. Still pale, his glasses reflecting little blobs of light when the sun caught them, the sheriff didn't look like he was advertising that star much. But he rode out and turned back a steer that broke from Will's bunch!

Playing it fair, Will took them as he came to them—fifty head of two year olds, what he'd bought from Lace last year. Lace raged like a gored bull.

"I'll break you, Clayt!" he roared. "I'll throw you both in jail."

"Thanks, Clayt," Will broke in, mopping sweat from his face. "And thank you, Lace, for the wedding present."

"Present, hell!" Lace exploded. "I'll have the Judge—"

"I wouldn't irk the Judge," Will said gently. "I bought the Beechey house from him; he'd hate to have to give back the money."

"Ahhhhh!" Clayt Alston sighed his relief. He said, "I tried to talk some sense into you, Will, but I guess I'm as stubborn as you. I'll go along so far, and then—"

He screwed up his face and spat, narrowly missing Lace.

"Sorry, Mr. Lace," he said. "Man with two daughters can't afford to play favorites."

"I'll be heading out now," Will said, shoving the bandanna in his back pocket. "Like I say, thanks for the present, Lace. You should have mentioned those cows on the second check like you did on the first."

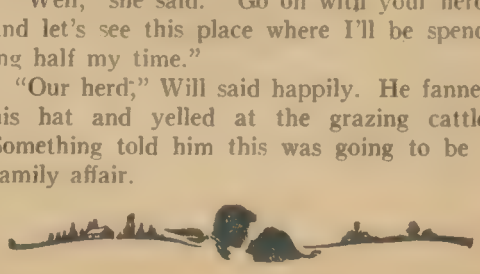
Marty met Will driving his cattle halfway to the section, relief in her eyes.

"Love me, love my cows," he said.

"That's what I thought would happen," Marty said grimly. "That's why I sent Dad out, so you wouldn't get hurt."

"Well," she said. "Go on with your herd, and let's see this place where I'll be spending half my time."

"Our herd," Will said happily. He fanned his hat and yelled at the grazing cattle. Something told him this was going to be a family affair.



"Am I a bone to be fought over by two dogs?" Maureen snapped

Saddle and Ride

By William Heuman

WISH MALONE helped escort thirty-five hundred head of Texan longhorns up the Chisholm Trail to Hays City, but when he came down the Trail, headed back home, he came alone. He turned off at the little cowtown of Whistle Springs, which was south of the Red River.

He rode into the dusty main street of Whistle Springs reluctantly, the way any man would who was the bearer of bad news. Whistle Springs was new to him, but it was here that his outfit had picked up handsome Hamp Cannivan six months ago on the way north with the trail herd. Hamp wasn't coming back, and there was a girl in this town by the name of Maureen O'Kelly who had to know about it.

The buckskin he was riding seemed just as reluctant as he was, as it stumped down

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MAUREEN O'KELLY HAD beautiful red hair . . . and a temper to match

the street, raising tiny dust clouds from each hoof. Wish's lean body swayed with the movement of the horse.

He was not good-looking like Hamp Cannivan, but he was not ugly, either. He was tall and lean, with sand-colored hair, sandy eyebrows, and deep-set pale blue eyes that were habitually narrowed from squinting into the sun all day. His nose had been straight until a calf he'd been branding had got a leg loose and pushed a little hoof against the nose. Now there was a crease across it.

He had a good jaw, however, and his mouth was firm, and the horse he rode was in good shape despite the long distance it had come. In Texas a man could always be sized up correctly by the condition of his horse.

The Texas Trail Saloon was at the far end of the street, just beyond the barbershop and directly across from the Empire Hotel. Wish Malone pulled up at the tie-rack in front of the saloon, noticing that the signboard over the door announced that the proprietor was Fat Jack O'Kelly. According to Wish's information, Fat Jack was the father of Maureen O'Kelly, who had been betrothed to Hamp Cannivan.

Wish rubbed the buckskin's nose before he ducked under the rail and went up on the walk. The afternoon was so warm that heat exuded from the board sidewalk. Wish squinted up at the sun, grimaced, then pushed through the batwing doors.

THERE had been no other horses at the tie-rack this early in the day, and there were no customers at the bar. But, to his surprise, a girl with flaming red hair was behind the bar washing glasses. She looked at him curiously as he came in.

Hamp had said that Maureen had red hair, but he hadn't said that it was a burnished, coppery red which went particularly well with the azure of her eyes.

She was wearing a green dress whose short sleeves revealed well-rounded arms. She was not hard to look at, even for a man like Wish Malone, who had never showed more than a passing interest in any girl.

As he bellied up to the bar he was liking this mission less and less. She dried her hands and came toward him.

Smiling a little, she said, "I don't tend bar here, but my father is out for a moment. What'll you have?"

"Beer," Wish said.

She took a clean glass from the shelf, filled it at one of the barrels, and slid the glass expertly in front of him. He placed a coin on the bar and scratched his jaw reflectively.

He asked, "Miss Maureen O'Kelly?"

"That's right."

Wish moistened his lips. "Friend of Hamp Cannivan," he mumbled, frowning as he looked down at the counter.

"You have a message for me from Hamp?" she asked.

He saw her face light up, and wondered how it would feel to have a girl think of him like that. He had to come out with it now, no matter how it hurt.

He said doggedly, "Reckon Hamp isn't coming back, ma'am."

For eight hundred odd miles he'd had this on his mind, and it sure was good to get it off.

He could see that she was hurt—could see it come into her eyes, slowly, then get bigger as shock came.

"Hamp was killed on the drive," she said in a low, pinched voice.

Wish Malone's jaw sagged and he stared at her. "Hell, no," he said: "Hamp kind of married this honey-haired gal up in Hays—his landlady's daughter."

The beer was in front of him, but he never got to drink it. As he saw her lips thin in a tight line, he remembered Hamp's admonition.

"She's red-haired," Hamp had said, "and she's got a temper to go with the hair, Wish."

Even so, he wasn't prepared for the glass of beer that was thrown full into his face. He stepped back, the beer blinding him for the moment, then splattering down the front of his gray flannel shirt.

When he'd wiped the liquor from his eyes and could see again, he noticed the consternation on her face.

"I'm sorry," she gasped. "I didn't think."

"Yes, ma'am,' Wish muttered.

An enormously fat man with a nearly bald head was coming through the side door behind the bar, a soiled apron around his waist, a stub of cigar in his mouth. He had a round head and three chins, and on his face was an

expression of rare, unperturbed good humor.

As Maureen handed Wish a towel, the fat man calmly filled a beer glass and slid it in front of Wish.

He said, "One on the outside of you was on the house, I suppose. This one is the chaser. Drink her down, stranger."

"Obliged," Wish muttered.

He wiped his face with the towel, then sipped the beer. He was wet and uncomfortable, and he didn't want to look at Maureen O'Kelly.

"This gentleman," Miss O'Kelly said, "is a friend of Hamp's, Father."

Fat Jack O'Kelly leaned two enormous arms on the bar.

"Hamp is dead?" he said hopefully.

"Got married," Wish said, "up in Hays."

He didn't drink any more beer. With beer on the outside of him, it did not seem to go good on the inside.

"Have another," Fat Jack said cordially. "Have whisky—on the house."

"Reckon I'll change this wet shirt," Wish said.

"I'm very sorry," Maureen told him again.

"It was nothing," Wish said.

ANGER was gone from her now, washed clean out of her blue eyes. She was a little girl who'd been naughty and wanted to make amends.

"I'll wash that shirt for you," she offered.

"Got another one in my warbag," Wish told her, and backed away from the bar.

"So Hamp Cannivan is married," Fat Jack said musingly. "The bearer of good news is always welcome in this establishment, my friend. Stop in any time."

"I'm obliged," Wish said.

He had another look at Maureen O'Kelly just before he went through the batwing doors to the street. And he wondered how it was possible for such a pretty and considerate girl to throw a glass of beer into a man's face. She acted like she was not one girl, but two.

She came out on the walk as he untied the buckskin, and he could see that she was still disturbed. As he touched his hat to her a buckboard was swinging into position at the rack.

There were matched sorrels in the traces, and the man driving was a match for the horses. He was big in the shoulders, had a red face, and ash-blond hair. His new boots were a shiny mahogany color, his expensive light gray Stetson, was a match for his fawn-colored vest.

There was nothing of the dude about him, though. His green eyes went over Wish, sizing him up, then dismissing him.

He said to the red-haired girl, "Howdy, Maureen."

Wish went across the street, leading the buckskin, as the red-faced man stepped down from the buckboard. Wish stabled his mount behind the hotel, then went into the lobby and registered.

The clerk, a thin-faced, youngish man who wore spectacles, sniffed and looked at the stains on Wish's shirt.

"It's beer," Wish said.

"Careless in your drinking?" the clerk asked.

"Flung at me," Wish told him. "Any more questions, mister?"

There were no more questions. The clerk didn't care for the look in Wish's pale blue eyes.

In his hot, stuffy room on the second floor, Wish pulled down the shade, took off his shirt, and hung it across the back of the chair. He fished his Sunday shirt out of his warbag and put it on. Then he sat down on the edge of the sagging bed, rolled a cigarette, and touched a match to it.

He sat there for some time, wondering why Hamp Cannivan had been such a fool. The honey-haired girl Hamp had married was not half the woman Maureen O'Kelly was. The redhead had fire. Wish Malone, who liked spirited horses, was intrigued by someone who could throw beer into the face of the man who brought her the news that her beloved had married another girl.

He got up after awhile, and peered around the edge of the window shade out onto the street. The heat shimmered down there, and a passing rider kicked up dust. The tiny particles of alkali, hanging in the air, glittered like diamonds.

The buckboard was still tied out in front of the Texas Trail Saloon, but he didn't see the man who had driven it. The buckboard

looked new. Its yellow wheels and black body shone with fresh paint. Wish Malone scowled, imagining that the man with the ash-blond hair was still inside the saloon with Maureen O'Kelly.

Stubbing out the cigarette, he went downstairs and out onto the porch. It was cooler in the shade. He shoved a wicker chair up near the railing and sat down, putting his boots up on the porch rail. In a little while he saw the red-faced man come out of the Texas Trail with Maureen O'Kelly. In the sunshine her red hair gleamed, and a slight breeze blew the loose tendrils a little.

They talked and then the big fellow touched his hat, climbed into the buckboard, and swung the sorrels around. As he brought the animals about in a full circle to head back out of town, he saw Wish on the porch. There was no friendliness in the look he gave the Texas waddy.

MAUREEN saw Wish, too, and she lifted a hand. Wish nodded to her as gravely as a man could to a girl who had recently thrown a glass of beer into his face.

The clerk came out onto the porch for a breath of fresh air and stood there, snapping his suspenders.

Wish said to him over his shoulder, "Who's the feller owns the new buckboard with the matched sorrels?"

"Rand Lisenbee. Runs the Circle L up on Crazy Creek."

Wish shrugged. "Sweet on that O'Kelly girl, I notice."

"You noticed right." The clerk grinned. "He's a rough one, that Lisenbee."

"He come in since Hamp Cannivan left?"

"New rancher in these parts." The clerk nodded. "You know Hamp?"

Wish nodded.

"A drifter," the clerk said. "A no-good. But all the women around these parts were crazy about him."

Wish didn't say anything to that. The labels the clerk had used pretty well fitted the easy-going Hamp.

"That kind," the clerk went on, "go up the Trail and make a few dollars, and then they blow it in the week after the herd is delivered. Next spring they go up again. For what?"

"I don't know," Wish said.

He hadn't blown his in. He had a draft in his pocket on a Hays City bank, and that draft was enough to get him started on his own ranch. He had the place picked out—down along the Sabine, good grass, plenty of water.

The clerk went back inside, grumbling about trail drifters. Wish rolled another cigarette. He was putting a match to it when Maureen came out of the saloon again and crossed over toward him.

She stopped just below where he sat on the porch. Wish came out of his chair, touching his hat. He dropped the cigarette and the brown tobacco spilled over the porch floor.

The red-haired girl said, "Father and I would like you to have supper with us tonight. I'm still sorry about the beer."

"It was nothing," Wish assured her again.

"Will you come?"

Wish nodded. "Obliged."

"It'll be ready in half an hour."

She walked back across the street, and he mechanically rolled another cigarette. He ruined this one, too, because his fingers didn't seem to work properly, and tossed paper and tobacco into a pail of sand on the porch.

After awhile he crossed the street and went around to the side door of the saloon. Maureen opened the door to his knock. She was wearing a bright gingham dress, a little faded from washing but clean and neatly ironed.

"Haven't had a home-cooked meal," Wish said as he came in, "since I was twelve."

Maureen looked at him with compassion. "You've been on your own as long as that?"

"Ma died when I was twelve," Wish said. "Pop was off busting broncs somewhere. Haven't seen much of him since. I got a job with an outfit down below the Sabine, and I've been riding ever since."

Fat Jack O'Kelly, sitting at the kitchen table with a napkin around his neck, asked, "What do you boys figure on doing when the market closes up north and there aren't any more trail herds to work?"

"Plenty to do down here," Wish said.

He sat down in the chair Maureen pointed to, and put his hat under the chair. The smell

of hot biscuits came from the oven and he sniffed hungrily.

"Plenty of what to do?" Fat Jack asked.

"Always be a market for beef," Wish said. "When the railroad comes here we won't have to push the herds north."

"If you're going in for ranching," Fat Jack murmured, "It takes money, young man."

"Been saving mine," Wish said.

Fat Jack lifted his eyebrows but said nothing. Maureen sat down at the table with them. The steaks were well done, the gravy rich and brown. Wish ate silently, plentifully, as is the custom in the West, and when he'd finished and Fat Jack handed him a cigar, Wish said, "Best meal I ever had."

Maureen smiled at him as she started to clear away the dishes. She came out then with an apple pie to go with the pot of coffee, and Wish had two pieces of pie. It was good, juicy, the crust brown and crisp.

"Saving your money to go into ranching," Fat Jack said as he puffed on his cigar, "and a friend of Hamp Cannivan. Doesn't go together, somehow."

"Hamp had his own ideas," Wish said.

FAT JACK smiled, "I know all about Hamp's idea." He glanced over his shoulders toward the stove, where Maureen was cleaning a pot. He added in a voice too low for her to hear him, "Was hoping that Cannivan got lost somewhere up north."

"He isn't coming back," Wish said.

"If he does he'll find Rand Lisenbee waiting for him," Fat Jack said.

Wish decided that he didn't like that comment. "Lisenbee a pretty big man around here?" he asked.

Fat Jack nodded. "He'll be the biggest cattleman in this state some day."

"That so?" Wish murmured.

He smoked and watched Maureen washing the dishes at the other end of the kitchen.

"Staying around awhile?" Fat Jack asked him.

Wish nodded. "While."

Fat Jack pushed back his chair. He said, "Have to get back to the bar."

Wish went over to the sink and picked up a towel. "Used to help Mom," he said, and began to dry the dishes as they came out of the water.

"You don't have to," Maureen protested.

When they'd finished it was dark. They went outside to the street and stood in the shadows, watching the lights come on in town. It was cooler, now that the sun had gone down, and there were more people about. Customers strolled into the Texas Trail or stood outside the front door talking.

"Nice night to walk," Wish said.

He walked with her to the far end of town, turning back when they'd reached the wooden bridge over a dry wash. He told her about how it was on the trail going north—the nights when the herd stampeded, the days rounding them up again, the bad crossings over swollen streams, and how one of the boys had died crossing the Arkansas.

She didn't ask any questions about Hamp Cannivan, and if she had all Wish could have told her was that Hamp was a good trail man. It was only in town when women were around that Hamp went astray.

"You going back up next spring?" she asked.

"Last one this year," Wish told her. "Settling down on my own place."

"That's nice," she said.

"Man needs land," Wish said, "land and stock. I aim to have both before long."

"I hope you get them," Maureen said.

They sat outside the kitchen door for a time when they got back, and after awhile he crossed the road to the hotel. When he looked back from the porch he saw her still standing in the shadows near the side door.

He had intended to ride on the next morning, after a night's rest, but he didn't. He told himself that the buckskin needed another day in the stable, but knew all the time that it wasn't true.

He rubbed the animal down in the morning, brushing him carefully. Then he had his dinner in a lunchroom down the street. When he came back to the hotel he found a man sitting in one of the wicker chairs on the hotel porch. A new buckboard, with bright yellow wheels, and with matched sorrels in the traces, stood in front of the hotel. The man in the chair was Rand Lisenbee.

Wish went up the steps without haste, nod-

ded to the big rancher, and would have passed, but Lisenbee's voice stopped him. Lisenbee had green eyes, very green, very cold. His expensive Stetson was pushed back on his head. He had a cigar in his mouth.

He said around the cigar, "I was waiting for one drifter to come back down the trail. Another came in his place."

Wish Malone looked down at him. "That so?" he said, his voice interested.

"Maybe you'll be in this town another day," Lisenbee said, "and maybe you won't. Take my advice."

"Always listen to advice," Wish said.

"Don't do your drinking in the Texas Trail."

Wish looked at him, and then across the street at Fat Jack O'Kelly's Saloon.

"You don't like the Texas Trail?" he asked softly.

"I like it." Lisenbee smiled. "I don't want you to like it."

"Kind of getting too big for that hat you're wearing," Wish said. "That right?"

RAND LISENBEE stood up, the cigar still in his mouth. He was a bigger man than Wish, heavier in the shoulders, and he was arrogant as he stood there, the cigar tilting upward.

"I don't like drifters," he said.

"I don't like tinhorns," Wish told him evenly.

They stared at each other for a few moments, then Rand Lisenbee took the cigar from his mouth and tossed it out across the walk, where it spluttered out in the dust of the road.

He said flatly, "Remember what I told you, Jack."

He went down the porch steps then, and climbed into his buckboard, driving toward the other end of town. Wish watched him go, and when he turned toward the door of the hotel he saw the clerk standing there, grinning at him.

"Kind of run into a little trouble over that redhead?" the clerk asked, chuckling.

"No trouble on my part," Wish said.

But as he went on upstairs to his room he knew that in a half hour now the story would be all over town that Rand Lisenbee had ordered a drifter to stay away from redhaired Maureen O'Kelly, or face the consequences. If he didn't want any trouble with Lisenbee it was time for him to saddle the buckskin and ride. Only he wasn't riding—not till the stars fell from the sky.

An hour later he came downstairs, and the clerk watched him narrowly from behind the desk.

"The Texas Trail is out of bounds," he said.

Wish just looked at him, went out and crossed the road to the saloon. Fat Jack O'Kelly was behind the bar, huge elbows resting on the wood. He'd been watching Wish over the tops of the batwing doors, and he said when Wish approached, "Bucking a big man, Malone."

"I'll buck him," Wish said. "Beer."

"Still got a chance to get it down the street," Fat Jack remarked.

"I'll get it here," Wish said.

He put a coin down on the wood. He'd noticed as he crossed the street that Lisenbee's buckboard was tied up down the street, and he wondered how soon it would be before the rancher came up this way. He'd been conscious that people were watching him as he came out of the hotel. Several men had been standing on the corner below the hotel; others were out in front of the Silver Dollar Saloon. It was an unsual amount of activity for this time of the day.

The Texas Trail was empty, however, and Wish stood at the bar alone, drinking his beer. He'd nearly finished it when Maureen came in through the side door. She was wearing the green dress again, and she was worried. He could see it in her eyes and in the way she hurried over to him at the bar.

She said, "I wish you wouldn't stay here," Mr. Malone."

Wish lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "Your father sells good beer," he said.

"You know why I want you to go."

"Can't run off," Wish said, "because a bigger dog came around." He paused, then said, "You want me to ride out, ma'am?"

"I don't want to have any trouble here."

"Reckon I'll wait for him," Wish said. He fingered the beer glass and he looked at Fat Jack O'Kelly on the other side of the bar.

"Isn't nice to be run out of town," Fat Jack said. "Easier to ride out. I say again,

he's a big man, a hard man."

Wish shrugged. "Reckon I'll find out how hard he is."

A man stepped to the doorway and called in, "Trouble heading this way, mister."

Wish finished his beer and turned around, facing the door. He said to Maureen, "Reckon you'd better move along, ma'am."

"Why not take it outside?" Fat Jack asked. "Costs money to fix up a bar after it's been smashed a little."

Wish nodded and walked toward the door. As he went out on the walk he saw Rand Lisenbee coming up from the south end of town, walking under the wooden awnings. A half-dozen men came along in Lisenbee's rear. Others crossed the road to join this group.

WISH put his back against one of the awning uprights and stood there, hands hooked in his gunbelt, facing Lisenbee, who was now less than twenty yards away. He noticed that Maureen had come to the door and was standing there watching, the color beginning to leave her face.

"If I had known this was going to happen," she said, "I wouldn't have invited you for supper, or taken a walk with you."

"Worth it to me," Wish said, and she flushed a little.

"I'll talk to Rand," she said.

"Past talking," Wish murmured. "Fighting now."

Lisenbee slowed down as he approached. He looked at Maureen and then at Wish. He said to Wish, "Told you to do your drinking elsewhere."

"Rand," Maureen said tersely, "I don't like this."

"It's between me and him," Lisenbee stated. "If he's a man—"

"All I hear," Wish broke in, "is talk. You came here to fight. Get it started."

Lisenbee's eyebrows lifted. "It'll be a fight," he promised, and he unbuckled his gunbelt, handing it to a man behind him.

Wish took off his belt and draped it across the tie-rack in front of the saloon.

Lisenbee walked around the tie-rack, tossing his hat back on the walk.

Fat Jack O'Kelly said from the doorway of his establishment, "Two man fight out there. Anybody else figures on joining in will have to talk to me."

Wish said, "Come and get it, Lisenbee."

Rand Lisenbee lunged in, big fists whirling, driving the lighter man before him. Wish waited until the fury of Lisenbee's attack had subsided, then he held his ground, lashing out with both fists. He landed several hard blows to the face, and took a smash to the jaw which knocked him on his back.

He got up with the taste of blood in his mouth, and walked straight toward Lisenbee, who was waiting for him, fists clenched, blood dripping from a cut on the mouth.

They met with a flurry of blows, neither man willing to give ground this time. Again Wish was knocked down from a swinging blow to the head.

He got up patiently, his head ringing, and moved in once more to the attack. This time he knocked Lisenbee down, catching him in the pit of the stomach with a jolting right-hand blow. Lisenbee sat there staring at him, mouth open, gasping for breath.

"I'm not done," he panted.

"Neither am I," Wish said.

"I am," Maureen O'Kelly snapped, and she came between them with a bucket of water she'd drawn while the fighting was going on.

Half the contents of the bucket she hurled into Lisenbee's face as he started to get up from the ground. Then, turning, she threw the remainder of the water into Wish's face.

Lisenbee spluttered and gasped, staggering away, drenched from the waist up. He stared at Maureen uncomprehendingly.

Wish, who'd already sampled a bit of Maureen's temper, took it with more grace and more understanding, recognizing it for what it was. In a few moments she would be repentant, trying to make amends. Now she stood between them with flashing eyes.

"Am I a bone to be fought over by two dogs?" she snapped.

Fat Jack O'Kelly puffed on his cigar, his face expressionless. Rand Lisenbee was staring at Maureen as if he'd never seen her before in his life, and was not too sure he would ever like her.

He said gruffly, "Hell—hell, Maureen!"

"Now you can go back to your business," Maureen told them both tersely. "There will

be no more fighting." She turned and walked back into the saloon with the empty bucket.

RAND LISENBEE looked after her, and then at Wish, who was wiping the water from his face with his hands, a faint grin on his face. "Got a temper," Wish said. "That red hair."

"She can keep it," Lisenbee said, scowling. "The temper and the red hair."

"Something a man has to get used to," Wish said.

"Not me," Lisenbee snapped, and went up on the walk, picking up his hat and his gunbelt. "I'm not running out of this fight," he said to Wish. "Just don't have any reason for it any more."

"I know," Wish said sympathetically. "Would have been a good one, though."

The crowd dispersed as Lisenbee headed toward his buckboard. Wish picked up his hat, dusted it off, then followed Fat Jack O'Kelly into the saloon. Maureen wasn't there, having gone to the back rooms.

Wish kept brushing his hat with his hand. "She has a temper," he said.

"Like her mother," Fat Jack said. "A man who knows how to live with a temper really has something, though." He drew two beers, pushed one toward Wish, and lifted the other himself. "To all redheads," he said.

Wish drank some of the beer and put the glass down. He said, "Reckon you can tell her I'll be around, if she wants me to stay."

"She knows." Fat Jack smiled sagely. Lisenbee got most of that water, Malone."

Wish adjusted his hat, dusted himself thoughtfully, and walked toward the door. The sun was still shining brightly as he stepped out and crossed to the hotel. He didn't notice the heat now. His shirt was drenched again.

The hotel clerk, who'd watched the fight from the porch, said as he came up the steps, "Seems like people are always throwing things at you."

"Always welcome," Wish murmured, "when the right people do the throwing. She can throw things at me till the stars fall out of the sky."

She might, too, he reflected, and he knew he wouldn't mind.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. What was the bloody occupation of these three well known western Williams of the frontier: Billy Dixon, Bill Cody, Bill Comstock?

2. Which two of these famous Old West cowtowns were in Texas, which two in Kansas: Tascosa, Hays City, Ellsworth, Mobeetie?

3. What color or colors are the flowers of that bane of the range, loco weed?

4. True or false: braided horsehair ropes, once common in the cow country, were useless as lariats for roping.

5. Will Cook, whose stories you have read in RANCH ROMANCES, is ramrod of the committee on arrangements for the 1955 Annual Roundup of W.W.A. in San Francisco in May. "WWA" is the brand of what outfit?

6. At the oldtime chuckwagon what were well mannered cowhands supposed to pile in "the wreck pan"?

7. On what mountain pass between Colorado and New Mexico was Uncle Dick Wootten's famous toll road?

8. I heard an oldtime cowhand bragging that a horse he had once owned was "sure a good pegger." What did he mean?

9. The cow country West is sometimes spoken of as lying west of the 100th parallel of longitude, which happens to run smack through what hell-roaring old Kansas cowtown?

10. Do wapiti deer, commonly called elk, and western mule deer ever interbreed?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 93. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

THE QUESTION asked most frequently in our mail from readers of this column is "How can I get into rodeo?"

Unlike other highly competitive fields such as the movies or professional baseball, anyone with the entry fee can compete in his local rodeo, and by paying RCA dues can compete in *any* rodeo. You don't have to convince anybody of your skill beforehand.

So the answer to that question we started with is very simple to say: First learn how to ride a bronc or rope a calf. It's not so easy to do.

Riding is obviously a must in every rodeo event. Once you're really at home in the saddle, then you can begin to think of competing in the arena.

We've never heard of a top-hand who hasn't been riding almost all his life. Like everything else which requires muscular coordination, the earlier you start, the better at it you'll be.

To a cowboy, riding a broken horse feels easy and natural. He just doesn't have to think about what his feet are doing, whether his knees are grabbing, or how his hands are holding the reins. That's his basic preparation for riding a wild bronc.

Then, of course, he practices. He tries to ride every horse he sees. Maybe he hires out to a rodeo producer, or maybe he rides broncs at a wild-horse auction at five dollars a head.

Roping, in our opinion, is the most exacting rodeo sport, but it's also one that you can practice by yourself. Without even owning a horse you can learn to build your loop and to throw it accurately. And it's the one rodeo event that we can give you some tips on.

The most common mistake that novice ropers make is tossing their loops with a wild swinging motion. The loop seldom holds; it falls short of its mark and lands with no force. The secret of throwing a rope is that you throw it like anything else—a baseball or a rock—straight at your target, hard and fast.

Go out in your back yard and pick up a pile of fist-sized stones. Try throwing them at a spot on the ground fifteen or twenty feet away. Don't pick a fence-post or a tree for your target—remember you're on a horse and the calf's head is about four or five feet lower than yours.

Throw your rocks hard—and follow through. Your arm should be extended straight ahead of you, even your fingers pointing straight ahead when the rock leaves your hand.

Your eyes of course are on the target, sighting right down that straight arm.

After a day or two you'll be pretty good at throwing rocks, so now get your rope out. It'll feel a lot different from the rock. But, after threading your loop, swing it around over your head a couple of times until it's a nicely balanced circle, and then let fly at your spot on the ground. Follow through as hard as you can. When you've conquered this basic step in rope-throwing, then you can take aim at fence posts or the barnyard pump, pulling your rope taut when you've caught what you're after (unless it's old Bossy, or Tabby or Rover).

When you rope from a horse, you have to aim a little ahead of what you want to catch, if it's a fast-moving calf in the arena. When you've got the critter around the neck, your follow-through hand is in perfect position to tighten the rope and throw the slack behind so that your horse won't step on it.

There now, that's one way to get into rodeo—and we'll admit that it's a lot easier to tell you than to show you.

Adios,

THE EDITORS.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE

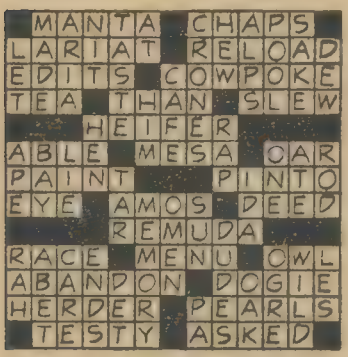
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

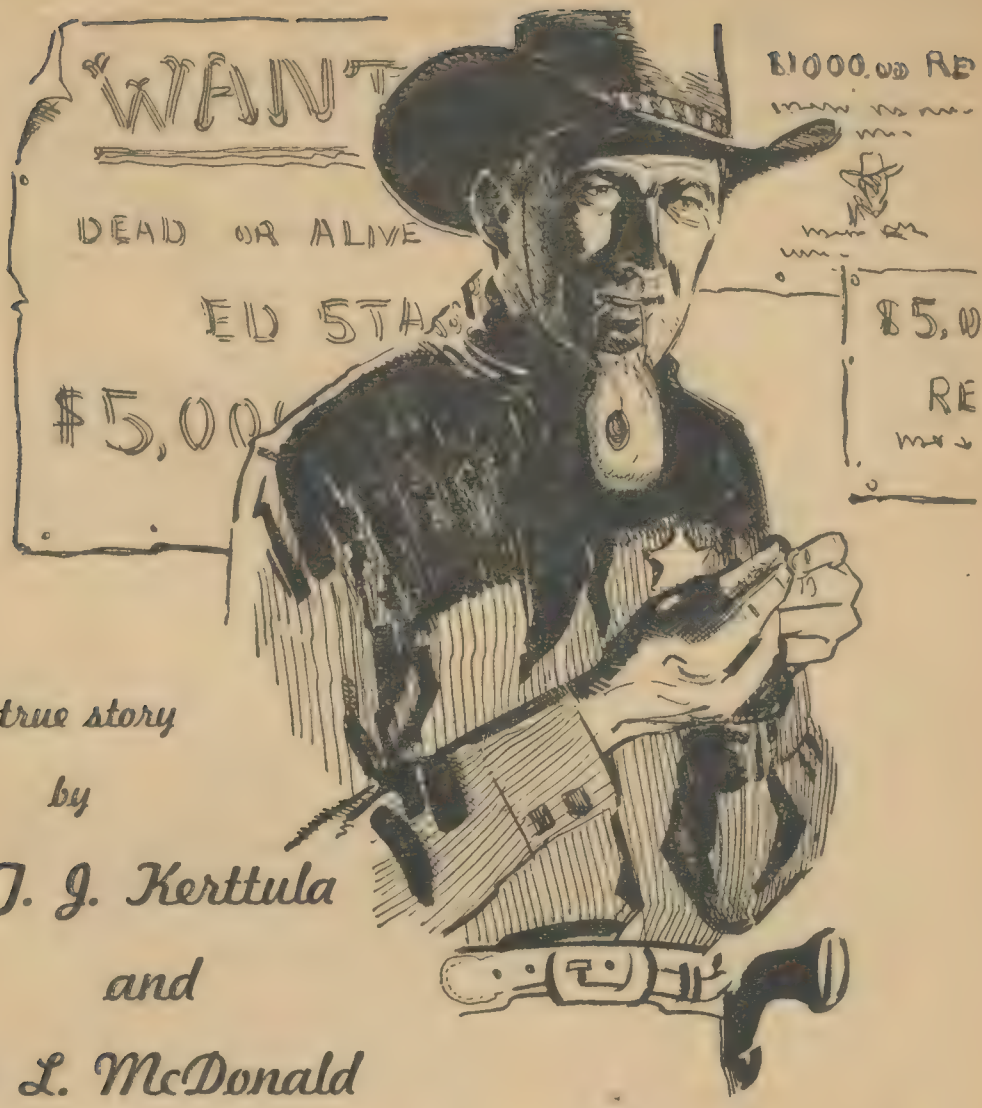
1 Western tableland
5 The girl
8 Thin nail
12 Scent
13 Chum
14 Charge per unit
15 Indefinite article
16 Ranch wagon for provisions (2 wds.)
19 To seize
21 Noah's boat
22 Foe
23 Loiters
25 Scarlet
26 Cowboy garment
28 Seed container
29 To steal from
32 To seep
33 It's for horses
34 Song for one
35 To be in debt
36 Cowboy
37 Another cowboy
38 To allow
39 Military assistant
40 Table utensil
43 Donkey
44 Belonging to us
47 Cowboy
50 Yes (Spanish)
51 Girl's name
52 Part of "to be"
53 Prayer ending
55 Theresa's nickname
56 Writing tool
57 Group of cattle

DOWN

1 To groan
2 Miss Ferber, author
3 Therefore
4 Curved line
5 Cowboy boot attachments
6 To cut without skill
7 Large deer
8 Owner's mark on cattle
9 Violent anger
10 —— bomb
11 To contradict
17 Ugly old women
18 Unwanted plant
20 White patch on horse's face
24 Monkey
25 —— Rogers, cowboy
26 Dove's sound
27 In what way
28 Cooking vessel
29 Wild West show
30 Not young
31 Lad
33 Sombrero
34 Unhappy
36 Restaurant list
37 Full of wisdom
38 Gallops easily
39 Ash-gray
40 Go, cat!
41 Corn bread
42 Possesses
43 Land measure
45 Employer
46 Orange peel
48 Short sleep
49 College cheer
54 Myself



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue



a true story

by

J. J. Kerttula

and

D. L. McDonald

The Reluctant Deputy

HE SEEMED no more than a slight, soft-spoken kid when he rode into the line camp of the N Bar N outfit on a blustery fall night in 1896, but as a deputy stock inspector under the famed old "W. D." Smith he was to become one of the legends of the West. Montana in the mid-nineties offered wide scope for the talents of a man like Tommy Dunn.

The Johnson County range war had run its course, but the hate

and bitterness it engendered still threatened at any moment to engulf Wyoming's ranges in a swirl of powder smoke again. Tight-lipped lawmen sat on the lid of the powder keg, determined it would not again blow up under them, while northward onto the vast cattle ranges of eastern Montana drifted the derelicts of this war.

Bitter and vindictive small ranchers who had been forced out, hired gunmen of the big outfits, and cowboys who had ridden for one side or the other, suddenly found it expedient to seek another range. In Montana, at a time when local cowmen no longer packed guns openly in town, their air of ceaseless vigilance and their low-swinging guns immediately branded these Johnson County veterans, and added to rangeland vocabulary a new phrase—"the Johnson County look."

Most of them had not come north to begin again on a new range, but to carry on the war which strict law enforcement had made impossible in Wyoming. Relentlessly they set out to hunt each other down, only to die, each in his turn, in prairie ambushes, saloon brawls, or in countless other violent ways. The shooting grew considerably more accurate than it had been at first, so that more Johnson County men died with their boots on in Montana than had even been wounded in the original fracas. In fact, during the next ten years this fighting crew is said to have succeeded in completely exterminating itself.

So, while Johnson County men continued to murder each other in Montana, an uneasy peace settled over their home range. Men began to ride a bit looser in their saddles. At last one George Wellman, foreman of the Hoe (one of the big outfits involved in the original war), began to get careless. Ignoring orders that no man of the outfit should ever ride alone, he set out on a sole beef scouting expedition along the Powder River, just south of the Montana line. No one saw him again until his body was picked up in a clump of cottonwoods a week later, a .44 slug neatly placed in the middle of his forehead.

FROM the viewpoint of Wyoming's law enforcement officers, some unknown gunman had touched a match to the fuse of their powder keg. The only way to prevent the outbreak of another shooting war was to round up all known enemies of the Hoe or its drygulched foreman, and from their number try to pick the killer.

They moved fast and ruthlessly, collaring all but a man named Ed Starr, one of the "little" ranchers who had plenty of reason to hate the Hoe. When no trace of Starr could be found, it was immediately assumed that he'd done the shooting. The hunt for him intensified, and moved up into Montana, where he was known to have numerous friends.

Sheriffs, marshals, even stock inspectors were ordered to drop everything else and concentrate on the search. Again and again the dragnet swept the ranges along the Milk, the Big Muddy and as far as the Yellowstone, in one of the most intensive manhunts in the annals of the West. But no trace of Ed Starr could be found in Montana.

Finally the law, forced to revise its thinking, concluded that Starr must have ridden south instead, perhaps to Arizona where his family supposedly lived. The search shifted there, but still there was no trace of Starr. The man had vanished like a puff of smoke from the range. But the law was stubborn; it kept on looking.

While Starr and the law played tag all over the ranges, the kid Tommy Dunn was making a name for himself as top hand of the N Bar N. He'd ridden in unannounced on a night so cold and miserable the crew were huddled against whatever shelter they could find, as they ate their supper by the light of a campfire. So absorbed were they in their own troubles that they did not notice him until he rode into the firelight. Dismounting, he groped his slicker and brought out a letter.

"Tom Wilson!" he asked, surveying the crew. Wilson, the foreman, rose and moved closer to the fire to read the letter, which merely contained instructions from the owners of the outfit to put the kid to work. His name, the letter said, was Tommy Dunn.

Of medium height and very slight build, Dunn nevertheless quickly proved he could do anything a bigger man could, and frequently do it better. Paired with top hand "Long Henry" Thompson at the toughest job on roundup, flanking yearlings, Tommy held

his own and even forced Thompson's pace.

Though this incensed Thompson, it won the kid the liking and respect of the other men. Although quiet and reserved, he soon made friends with everyone. If he didn't talk much about his past—well, neither did a lot of men in Montana in the mid-nineties. The crew took him at face value and let it go at that. The only one who questioned him was Long Henry Thompson.

Dark-browed and moody and with a temper almost psychopathic when aroused, Thompson had been top dog on the N Bar N until Tommy Dunn arrived. As the weeks passed his jealousy and resentment grew, until it could no longer be kept in bounds. For the most part the kid, while refusing to back down, managed good-naturedly to overlook Thompson's baiting. But gradually the rivalry between the two built up and became more bitter. The showdown finally came one night as the crew assembled around the chuckwagon for a belated supper.

A chuckliner riding through that day had brought word that the fugitive Ed Starr had again apparently eluded the law down in Arizona and that the reward for his capture had been raised once more. As they ate the boys discussed the manhunt, with many openly sympathetic toward the missing man.

SUDDENLY Thompson said heatedly, "If I ever run across that dirty dog of a Starr or any of the other two-bit scum like him, you can bet your cinch rings I won't bring 'em in alive. I rode for the Hoe once, and George Wellman was as white a foreman as ever forked a bronc. Drygulching him was nothing but murder!"

Tommy Dunn stood up, threw his plate in the dishpan, and leaned against the rear wheel of the chuckwagon while he rolled a smoke.

Watching him, Thompson drawled, "You know, Dunn, standing there that way, still packing your guns, you could be taken for one of them soreheaded little nesters like Starr, yourself. Seems like you've got the Johnson County look."

Tommy froze, the unlit cigarette still in his left hand. Slowly his right hand slid down, to come to a stop with the thumb hooked in the cartridge belt above his gun.

"If you aren't lying, as I strongly suspect, and you ever did ride for the Hoe," he said softly, "you should be mighty familiar with that Johnson County look. You aiming to take *me* in dead, Henry?"

"Hells bells, no!" Thompson, caught off guard, still squatting by the fire with his plate on his lap, was forced to back down. "I was only joshing, kid. Never meant you were one of them. Just suggested you might be to see if I could jolt you into saying what range you came from."

"A range where they'd never let a four-flusher like you rise higher than a cook's flunky," Tommy said coldly. "You talk mighty big about not bringing them in alive, but the only way you'll ever take me or any other man will be with a bullet hole between his shoulder blades."

With a bellow, Long Henry Thompson went for his gun, but before it cleared leather foreman Tom Wilson jerked down his hand.

"I don't want to lose either or both of my top hands, boys," he drawled, "but I'm not aiming to make a little Johnson County out of the N Bar N, either. There'll be no leather slapping while you work for me."

For the moment his authority held, but it was plain the range wouldn't be big enough to hold the two of them from now on. But if the foreman fired one cowboy that would only add to the bad feeling. The other cowhand would be blamed for the loss of the job. On the other hand, to keep both men would mean riding constant herd on them, a job for which the foreman had neither the time nor the inclination.

After some cogitating he ordered Long Henry out to ride night herd and, signaling Tommy to accompany him, he set out for town to dump his problem in the lap of the owners of the N Bar N, since they'd hired the kid.

Either the ranch owners valued Tommy Dunn, or they didn't want a killing on their range. In their turn they put a little pressure on the right spot down at Miles City, with the result that, sight unseen, the green kid cowboy was appointed deputy under Montana's most famous stock inspector, W. D. Smith. Smith himself was too far away at the time to be able to greet his new deputy personally.

This appointment, though it may have been a matter of expediency, turned out to be one Miles City officials had no reason to regret.

Back on the N Bar N, Long Henry Thompson nursed his resentment. Even the fact that Tommy Dunn was a lawman now might not have prevented a fatal meeting between the two, but for the fact that within a short time Long Henry suddenly went on a rampage, wounded two N Bar N punchers, and killed the cook. Holding the entire crew at bay while he forced the wrangler to saddle the best horse on the place, he galloped off into the night.

With his only known enemy gone, the kid settled down to his new job. As a stock inspector Tommy Dunn had found his groove. He took the job seriously and worked at it long and hard, and there was plenty of work for a conscientious man, too. Rustling was a headache of major proportions in the Montana of that day, with all the odds in favor of the rustlers.

The Missouri river breaks offered an ideal hiding place for any rustler who could get stock that far, and cowboys who were foolhardy enough to ride the breaks seldom came back. But Tommy rode them, again and again. Surprising two rustlers in the act of burning a brand, he brought them in, evidence and all, and watched them hang. Others he brought in, dead but still warm, tied across their saddles. Singlehanded he converted rustling from a profitable pastime into a mighty hazardous occupation in his district. Along the owlhoot trails of the Missouri went the warning, "Steer clear of Tommy Dunn!"

He was equally thorough about the other aspects of a stock inspector's job. Quickly he broke the locality of its habit of carlessness with strays, and "mavericking" dropped to an all-time low around the Saco country. As his fame spread, old "W.D." began to receive letters praising the work of his deputy. His curiosity aroused, he wrote Tommy a letter which read:

Dear Tommy:

It gives me great pleasure to report I have received many highly complimentary reports on the work you have done in stamping out rustling in your district. Even for a man with years of experience your record would be one to be proud of. In fact, experienced inspectors have failed to accomplish much in your part of the country. I would like you to come to Miles City so you may receive my commiendation in person. Perhaps in your methods might be something which could be profitably adopted by other deputies in other districts. We will discuss all aspects of the rustling problem when you arrive. Any time that is convenient for you will suit me, but the sooner the better.

As you undoubtedly know, we still have orders to keep looking for Ed Starr, wanted for murder in Wyoming. In case you have not received one, I am enclosing the latest dodger on him. The picture is an excellent likeness. He is known to have numerous friends in your district, so it is reasonable to suspect he might show up there some day. There is a substantial reward for his capture, but I must warn you he is known to be very fast with a gun, and dangerous. Do not take any unnecessary risks if you get the chance to take him.

Hoping to meet you soon, etc.

Though Tommy agreed to come to Miles City for the meeting, at the last moment Smith received a short note from his star deputy explaining that just then he was tied up with a very flagrant rustling case. If Smith didn't mind, Tommy would postpone the trip until later, perhaps in the fall.

But fall and winter passed and Tommy Dunn did not show up in Miles City. He said his district was growing, and he had no time to ride the long distance just to be patted on the back for doing a good job. Perhaps, he wrote, if things quieted down, he'd make it in the spring. But he didn't get around to it that spring, nor the one after that. Something always intervened.

Periodically "W.D." would toy with the idea of riding upstate to meet his now famous deputy, but he was getting to an age where it was easier to fork a swivel chair than a bronc. So he too never got around to it.

It was now the fall of 1901 and, although their association had lasted five years, the two men had not yet met face to face. It seemed, however, that the time had finally come. Forced to make a wide swing through the range country, Smith dropped Tommy Dunn a brief note. "Will be in Glasgo in ten days. Take a little time off and meet me there. That's an order! Smith."

But, even on this final occasion, Fate intervened. Smith's letter apparently crossed one from his star deputy which enclosed his resignation, to take effect at once. His mother, Tommy wrote, was seriously ill; and he

must go to her bedside. So, regretfully, he asked to be relieved of his duties as a deputy stock inspector. Before Smith got to Glasgo Tommy would be gone from Montana.

BUT Tommy had not gone home. As soon as his resignation was in the mail he set out for the N Bar N. "I'd kinda like to look around the country hereabouts for a spell," he explained to Tom Wilson.

But Wilson knew that Long Henry Thompson, tied up with the wild bunch, was back in the Saco country, and was boasting he'd face up to Tommy Dunn. At last the two were stalking each other, if not openly yet.

On his way back from Glasco, Smith swung in a wide arc that brought him close to Tommy Dunn's former headquarters in Saco. Hoping to pick up a few more legends about his fabulous deputy, "W.D." dropped in to see the sheriff. That worthy stared at him in amazement when he brought up the subject of Tommy Dunn.

"If that don't beat all!" he exclaimed. "Mean to say you haven't heard the kid was shot yesterday by Long Henry Thompson?"

"No! When did it happen, and how? Last I heard Tommy was leaving Montana. When did he git back?"

"He never left. He and Thompson have been stalking each other for two, three weeks now. Thompson rode in last night and gave himself up. Claimed they met out on the prairie about thirty miles west of here, and when Tommy recognized him he put spurs to his horse and rode down on him, firing both guns. Thompson says he shot in self-defense. And when we picked up the body, both Tommy's guns had been fired, one three times and the other one twice."

"Doesn't sound like Tommy, missing with five shots," Smith objected. "That kid has shot it out with rustlers when the odds was three to one against him and come out on top."

"That's what a lot of folks around Saco are saying," the sheriff admitted. "But what can we do but take Thompson's word for it?"

Smith was silent for a long time, lost in thought. "As long as he didn't leave the district," he murmured half to himself, "I wonder why he didn't meet me like we planned?"

"That isn't hard to explain, knowing Tommy. He'd just heard Thompson was back hunting him. Going to Glasgo might have lost the kid his chance to meet Long Henry. And likely Tommy quit his job because it's said Thompson is hooked up with the wild ones, and Dunn didn't want it to be said that he got his personal revenge while hiding behind the law."

"Well, maybe," Smith mused. "Funny how it turned out that me and Tommy were slated never to meet in all these years. Used to seem to me sometimes he was plumb reluctant to do so. Anyways, it'd kinda set my curiosity at rest to take one quick look at him now."

The sheriff nodded and led the way toward the back room.

Smith took one look at the dead man and drew back.

"You trying to fool me? This is my deputy, Tommy Dunn? Are you sure of it?"

"Of course I'm sure. I've known the kid personally ever since he hit this range."

"Not so you'd notice it, it isn't," Smith said softly as he replaced the tarp. "Anyway, that isn't the name that was printed on the dodgers. 'Ed Starr, dead or alive' is what they said." He shook his head. "And me shipping those 'wanted' posters along to this deputy of mine year after year . . . no wonder he was plumb reluctant to meet with me!"

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 86)

1. They were buffalo hunters.
2. Tascosa and Mobeetie in Texas, Hays City and Ellsworth in Kansas.
3. There are several different types of loco weed, with blossoms of varying colors: white, cream, lavender, purple.
4. True.
5. Western Writers of America.
6. Their dirty dishes, the wreck pan being a tub or large dishpan kept under the tailboard by the cook for that purpose
7. Ratón Pass (Rah-TONE)
8. That the horse was good at stopping or turning quickly when necessary—a much prized characteristic of a good cowhorse
9. Dodge City, Kansas.
10. No.

Bullet Range

By

Dan Riordan

Seever rose, and Reilly swung the whisky bottle

THE STORY SO FAR: REILLY MEYERS is railroaded to jail after trailing his rustled cattle to HERB WINEHAVEN'S ranch. It is suspected that Winehaven, MAX HORGAN, and BURK SEEVER have been rustling on a large scale, and that Reilly has seen something at Winehaven's ranch that—when he realizes its significance—will provide the evidence needed to convict the three men. Therefore they intend to get rid of Reilly, one way or another. On his release from jail Reilly learns that his girl, SALLY ISHAM, has married Seever.

He also learns that the ranchers, including his foster father PAUL CHILDRESS and his sister EMILY'S future husband AL MURDOCH, have suffered from rustler raids, and are working with U. S. Marshal HARRY PETERS to find the rustlers.

But Reilly refuses to get involved with them or with the Isham girls, Sally—who wants him back—and TESS, who has always loved him. Seever has Reilly jailed, tells Reilly he intends to kill him, and beats Reilly up. . . .

PART TWO

BURK SEEVER looked down at Reilly Meyers, beaten and helpless, and a wide grin spread across his face. "I've always wanted to stomp your guts, Reilly." He moved another step forward, then stopped dead still.

The front door opened suddenly and Reilly wearily turned his head. Al Murdock was standing there, a long-barreled Rogers & Spencer in his hand.

Seever said, "What is this, Al? You owe him something?"

"Some," Murdock said. He glanced at Reilly. "Get your gun and get. This is the last favor."

Reilly staggered with great difficulty to Henderson's desk, where he pushed the sheriff aside. He took his Remington and looked for his rifle, then realized he had just battered it to pieces.

"You can get into trouble for this," Henderson said. "This is jailbreaking, Al."

A smile creased Murdock's lips. "I'm worried." He glanced again at Reilly, who was weaving an erratic path to the door. "Can you make it? I brought your horse around front."

Reilly nodded and went out. Seever and Henderson remained rooted.

Harry Peters was standing beside Reilly's horse. Peters shifted the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other and said, "Better get out of town."

"Why didn't you come in and stop it?" Reilly asked, as he untied the reins.

"Politics," Peters said softly. "Sometimes a lawman's hands are tied." He nodded toward the horse. "Can you get on him?"

"I'll get on," Reilly said, and made the saddle on the second try. Reining away from the hitch-rack, he rode slowly down the side street, then cut over to take the road to his own Hangnoose spread.

The afternoon sun was hot on his back as he followed the creek for three miles, then dismounted to sit in the cold water. After some of the aches diminished he climbed out, dripping. Picking up his revolver, he mounted again and cut across the flats, toward the rougher land where his ranch lay. . . .

In the jail office, after Reilly had stumbled out, Sheriff Henderson and Burk Seever had remained rooted, both eying the heavy-caliber revolver in Al Murdock's hand. When Reilly's horse was out of sight, Harry Peters came to the open doorway and stood there, smiling around his cigar.

"It's all right now," he said blandly.

Henderson said, "Damn it, Al, I can't figure you pulling a stunt like this. What's your marrying Reilly's sister got to do with it?"

"When a man owes something, he pays," Murdock said. "Now I'm paid up." He moved backward, toward the door.

Seever's attention held on Murdock. "I'll remember this, Al."

"Who gives a damn?" Murdock said, and slammed the door.

He walked rapidly down the street with Harry Peters. Neither man spoke until Murdock stopped in front of the hotel porch. Then Peters said, "See you," and headed on down the street.

Slipping his pistol in his saddlebag, Murdock went up the porch steps. Tess Isham and Emily Meyers were on the porch waiting for him, their faces grave.

Tess said, "Burk got to him, didn't he?"

Paul Childress came out then, shot Murdock a questioning glance, and took a chair by the railing.

"Yes," Al answered Tess. "And some day Reilly is going to even that up."

"It was bound to come one way or another," Childress said, filling his pipe. "Reilly's different from most. There's something in him that won't let go when he gets his mind set."

AT THE next corner, Seever paused for a few final words with the sheriff, then went across the street. Henderson came on toward the hotel. Childress slapped his thigh and stood up.

"Time to be getting home," he said.

He went down the porch steps to the hitch-rail, where his buggy was tied. Emily and Tess followed. The two girls promised to visit soon, then Murdock lifted Emily into the rig. He turned around as Henderson clomped up, his boots rattling the boardwalk.

"By rights," the lawman growled, "I could lock you up for interfering, but I'm going to forget it, see?"

Childress climbed into the seat and said, "Let's go, Al."

Walking around Henderson, Murdock untied his horse. The sheriff followed him and, when Al tried to mount, took him by the coat sleeve, holding him. Murdock dropped his eyes to the hand, and the sheriff let go.

"I'm entitled to some respect," Henderson said.

"Better start earning it," Al said flatly, and mounted.

"Now just a minute here—"

"Jack, you've been coasting along free and easy for a long time," Murdock said, "but it's

over. I think you started something with Reilly you'll maybe wish you hadn't. At Herb Winehaven's you would have been money ahead just by giving Reilly his cattle back."

"Are you accusing me—"

"Take it any way you like," Murdock said.

He swung his horse, almost knocking the sheriff aside. Then Childress pulled out with the buggy and Murdock fell in behind, not looking back. They put the town behind them, and for awhile traveled without talk. But once, when Al Murdock lifted his hat, he exposed a band of sweat trapped there. . . .

Reilly Meyers found that riding bent over eased the pound in his head, but his face remained stiff. At last, in the lonely distance, his own ranch loomed up on the flatlands, bordering country that rose high and rough a half-mile behind the house. He quickened his pace, but ten minutes later paused to study the sluggish spiral of smoke rising from the kitchen chimney.

The sun was dropping now, and he cast long shadows on the ground as he dismounted beside the well. Easing onto the porch, Reilly went inside and tiptoed through the hall. In the kitchen a man was sitting at the table, his shoulders hunched, both hands wrapped lovingly around a coffee cup. No lamp had been lighted, and the darkness was thickening. Drawing his gun, Reilly said, "Sit still if you want to keep living."

The man's shoulders stiffened, but that was all. Stepping into the room, Reilly moved around the table. He slipped his gun back into his belt when he recognized Milo Bucks.

"What are you doing here?"

"Hungry," Bucks said; his face no longer stiff with tension. "I thought the place was deserted."

"You thought wrong," Reilly said. "I'll see what we can find to eat." He rummaged in the cupboard until he found a can of beans. He built up the smoldering fire in the stove and placed a frying pan on top of it. "How long you been here?" He dumped the beans into the pan and stirred them with an old spoon.

"An hour," Bucks said. He was staring at Reilly's puffed face. "That big feller get to you?" Buck's shoulders moved restlessly. "No man would do that to me."

Reilly's head came around and he studied young Bucks for a moment. "I used to talk like that. Hit first and think afterward. That's no good, Milo."

"It's good for me," Milo said stubbornly. "The big man's got it in for you, hasn't he?"

"Everybody's got it in for somebody," Reilly muttered. He could find only one tin plate, and dumped the beans into it. He sat down across from Milo and ate from the skillet. "Where you heading?"

BUCKS'S shoulders rose and fell. His young face was without guile. His eyes were a deep brown, almost black now that night was invading the room. Reilly touched a match to the lamp wick and settled back in his chair.

"I'm just riding," Milo said. "Seems like a waste, doesn't it?"

"Depends on who's doing it," Reilly told him. "You looking for a winter roost? Not much pay, but three meals a day and a wall to break the wind."

"I could use that," Bucks said and smiled, his face changing, revealing a gaiety that time and trouble couldn't hide completely.

After the beans were gone, Reilly shook out his tobacco and rolled a smoke, then offered the sack to Bucks. The young man fashioned a stubby cigarette and took a light from the lamp.

"The weed's a comfort," he said. "Like a cool drink of water on a hot day, or a fire on a cold night." He raised his eyes and looked at Reilly. "That was a hell of a jail, wasn't it?"

"The sheriff makes it that way," Reilly said, as he flicked ashes onto the floor. "You could have got in trouble, butting in that way."

"A man's a fool in a lot of ways," Bucks said. "He'll get boozed up, shoot off his mouth and get in a fight, or hunt himself up a woman, but he doesn't mean any of it."

"There's more to life than that," Reilly said.

"Sure, sure. But who thinks about that when they're twenty?" Bucks rose and threw his butt into the stove. "A man's got so much

MAN FROM MARS?

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running in him. Baying at the moon isn't confined to dogs, you know."

"I reckon not," Reilly agreed.

He got up and went outside. He stood quietly for a moment, then crossed the yard to the tack shed. When he came back, he brought with him an old holster and a cartridge belt, the leather stiff from disuse. He dropped his gun in the leather, buckled the belt around his waist, and filled the loops with blunt-nosed shells. When he went out to the front porch Milo Bucks followed him. They squatted on the steps to listen to the night sounds and study the enveloping blackness.

In the yard a broken bottle was catching the faint rays of the moon and flinging them away like a distant star. Across the outline of the land a coyote paused to cry out his complaint, then moved on, a shifting shape.

Far out on the road a party of horsemen made a steady drumming. When they drew nearer Reilly's attention sharpened. Milo Bucks drew his pearl-handled .44 and held it in his lap as the riders approached.

They slowed before coming into the yard. A man said, "He's here. I can see a light."

When they drew rein beside the watering trough Reilly stood up, taking care to keep away from the light streaming through the door. Not ten feet away Max Horgan, Indian Jim and Herb Winehaven sat their horses.

Reilly moved his hand toward Milo and the young fellow said to no one in particular, "I think I hear the horses getting restless," and walked rapidly toward the barn.

Facing the men, Reilly asked, "What do you want here, Max?"

"Talk." Horgan nodded to the others. "You know Indian Jim and Herb. Can we get down?"

"If you want."

Saddle leather protested as they dismounted. Indian Jim, a big man with a face the color of old leather and shoe-button eyes that darted here and there, held the horses.

"What's on your minds?" Reilly asked.

"I don't see why we should be on the peck at each other," Winehaven said. He was a runt of a man who wore old clothes with gaping holes at the elbows. His face was pointed and his mustache drooped past the corners of his lips.

"You always had guts, Herb," Reilly said.

"Now don't get hot," Horgan warned softly. "We want you in with us."

"In what?" Reilly asked.

HORGAN laughed, but Winehaven didn't even smile. The horses shifted and Indian Jim grunted to them in a quiet way.

"That reminds me," Reilly said, and moved past Horgan and Winehaven to walk up to Indian Jim. The big leather-faced man shifted uneasily as Reilly said, "You remember what you said to me that last time we met?"

"Been long time," Jim said thickly. "Forget easy."

"I haven't," Reilly said, hauled back and knocked the man beneath the horses. One snorted in surprise and all three animals began to mill, but Indian Jim had rolled out of the way and was on his feet again.

"Take it up from there if you want," Reilly invited.

"No," the big Indian said.

With a shrug, Reilly turned back to Horgan and Winehaven.

Moving his feet, Horgan said, "Now that that's off your chest, can we talk a little?"

"You talk. I'll listen."

"You got Burk mad as hell at you," Horgan said, "but that can be patched up. Get wise to yourself. You're on the outside looking in. We can use you."

"How?"

"This place you got here. There are some pockets back there; fair graze and some water." He thrust his hands deep in his pockets. "Make you a proposition that'll be hard to turn down."

"Make it."

"I buy a lot of stock—"

"Buy it or steal it?"

"Here, here," Horgan said gently. "We came friendly-like, so don't rile me."

Reilly glanced at Winehaven. "You get a good price for *my* cattle? I'm going to cut the price of 'em out of your hide."

"Pretty big talk," Winehaven said.

"This can be settled," Horgan said. "Who's

the kid you got here with you? Never mind; get rid of him."

"I like him," Reilly said. "Don't tell me what to do, Max."

"All right, all right," Horgan said in a soft voice. "About the deal—a cut of everything we hold here."

"How big a cut?"

"A tenth," Horgan said quickly.

"Go to the devil," Reilly told him.

Some of the softness left Horgan's voice. "You getting proud, Reilly? Burk's mad at you and now you've upset Jack Henderson. You think it over and we'll come back in a day or two."

"Save yourself the trip," Reilly said. "Your horses are getting spooky. They'll feel better with weight on 'em."

Horgan nodded and turned to his mount. Winehaven and Indian Jim swung up and waited.

"I meant what I said, Herb," Reilly murmured.

"I'll be expecting you," Winehaven promised. "It'll be different this time."

"We'll see," Reilly said, and stopped short, to look sharply at Horgan's horse.

He stepped up, took the bridle and turned the horse so that some of the lamplight fell on the face.

"Get away from there," Horgan snapped. "What do you think you're doing?"

Releasing the bridle, Reilly said, "That's a dandy sorrel you got there, Max. Seems that I recall seeing that blaze-face someplace before."

"If you did, I was on him," Horgan growled. "I raised this mare from a colt." He glanced at Winehaven, then back to Reilly. "I can prove it."

"No argument. I just said I saw her someplace before, but I can't recollect where, right now."

"Don't worry about it," Horgan said, and wheeled his horse.

Reilly watched them ride from the yard, turning when Milo Bucks's boots popped in the yard dust.

When Reilly glanced at him, there was nothing to be seen in the young man's eyes but a strict neutrality.

MILO said, "Nice people. That Indian didn't like the smack in the chops."

"You're smart," Reilly said. "Be smarter and saddle your horse, ride into Utah and join the Church. It'll be safe there."

"But dull." Bucks laughed. "This is the kind of hand I like, fast and with high stakes. If you got to lose, then lose it fast."

"That what you want to do?"

"It's less agony," Bucks said.

Reilly nodded. In spite of himself, that was his own way—to stake all on one card, win or lose. A part of him reached out to Milo Bucks, for in the young fiddle foot he saw many failings, most of which he had had himself when he had been Milo's age.

"Let's get some sleep," he said, and turned back toward the house.

The next morning Reilly gave Milo forty dollars and sent him to Buckeye for a wagonload of supplies. After Bucks rode out, Reilly saddled his own horse and cut through the hills in back of his place.

Through the morning he rode, finally breaking out on the flats that led to Childress's Broken Bit. When he saw the buildings in the distance, he jogged the stud into a lope. A half-hour later he tied up near the porch.

Murdock had been working by the barn, and he came across the yard when he saw Reilly. Murdock said, "Your face doesn't look too bad."

"Paul at home?"

"Inside," Murdock said, and followed Reilly into the house.

Childress came out of his study, his gold-rimmed glasses perched halfway down his nose.

After Murdock and Reilly took chairs, Childress asked, "Something on your mind, Reilly?"

"Cattle. You're overstocked, Paul, and I'm understocked. So let's make a deal."

"What kind?"

"I need a herd," Reilly said. "I've got graze and a watershed. Suppose I were to bed down three hundred head. There's still time to drive 'em over and let 'em find a winter bed. I don't get the snow that you do. They'll get fat, Paul."

"What will this cost me?" Childress asked.

"One out of ten," Reilly said, "and I'll take calves."

Childress drummed his fingers a moment, then glanced at Murdock. "What do you think?"

"Figuring a man's wages to winter out in the hills, I'd say buy it."

"When do you want 'em?"

"Give me thirty days," Reilly said, and stood up. "Emily and Ma in the kitchen?" Childress nodded and Reilly went to the rear of the house.

The enticing aroma of dried apple pie filled the air, and there was oven heat in the kitchen. Mrs. Childress smiled at Reilly, but when she saw his bruised face she scolded him with her eyes. Emily kissed him in passing, then pulled a chair out so he could sit at the table. She cut a wedge of pie and put it on a plate.

"Hate to strain Paul's hospitality," Reilly said.

"You'd make him happy," Mrs. Childress said, "if you'd only need him a little, Reilly. He's a giving man. That's his nature, and when he's stood off he hates it."

"And I've never needed his help, is that it?" He watched her and, when she didn't answer, added, "I'm sorry, Ma."

Emily's voice was soft. "Eat your pie, Reilly."

DARKNESS found Reilly Meyers in a series of swales where Jim Buttelow had a horse ranch in a valley rimmed by sage-studded hills. Away from the house, breaking and holding corrals fanned out like the spokes of a wheel.

Reilly rode into the darkened yard and dismounted. Lamplight made bright patches on the porch and Jim Buttelow came to the door, peering out into the night. He recognized Reilly and held the door open.

Buttelow was a friendly man with big bones and a rough manner, but he smiled easily and there was no surliness in his face.

"Got a proposition for you," Reilly said.

"If it makes me some money, then I'm interested," Buttelow said, smiling.

"I need a small remuda," Reilly said. "I made a deal with Paul to winter out part of his herd, but I've got have horses."

"Are you in a position to hold a small herd for me?"

"How many?"

"Fifty."

"Need a corral," Reilly said. "A big one. Haven't the time or the men to put it up."

"If you had the men?"

"I'd do it."

"Take Walt and Ernie Slaughter," Buttelow said.

"You getting tired of 'em? I couldn't pay much, Jim."

"They won't worry about money," Buttelow said. "A man never does, when he's young. Only old men want money, after all the other good things are gone." He stood up and offered his hand. "A deal?"

"A deal," Reilly said.

Buttelow walked with him to his horse. "I'll send the boys over in the morning."

"All right," Reilly said, and swung up. At the gate he turned in the saddle to look back, but the old man had gone back into the house.

It was after nine when he saw the lights of his own place. He rode up and dismounted at the barn, off saddled and walked to the house. He felt stiff and tired, and it had been morning when he had eaten Emily's pie, all he'd had all day. Hunger was an ache in his stomach.

When he reached the porch he paused, peering around the side of the house at a heavy shape in the deep shadows. He took three steps toward it before he realized it was a buggy.

He had whirled toward the porch when Sally said, "I was getting tired of waiting, Reilly."

From the kitchen the noises made by Milo Bucks were muffled. A heavy wagon had been drawn up to the back porch. The back door opened and slammed as Milo carried provisions into the house and stored them.

"What are you doing here?" Reilly asked Sally, and moved up onto the porch. He sat down on the railing, his feet braced wide on the floor. The light streaming from the door outlined him, but Sally was partially concealed, sitting in the shadows against the house wall.

She laughed softly. "Don't you know,

Reilly? Or is it that you like to have me keep telling you I just can't stay away from you?"

"Cut it out!" he said, and rolled a cigarette. "If Burk finds out you're here, he'll shoot me."

"Or you'd shoot him. Would you do that for me, Reilly?"

"No," he said flatly, and scratched a match against an upright. Firelight made a halo of his face for an instant. Then he whipped out the match. The end of his cigarette glowed and died.

"You're a restrained man, Reilly," Sally said. "Somehow I always liked that. You never panted, and I didn't have to fight off hot, sticky hands."

Her garments rustled as she stood up and came over close to him. She leaned slightly until her thighs touched his and stood that way, daring him, trying to draw him out of his shell of indifference.

"If I hadn't married Burk, you'd be in my parlor now."

"That's *if*. You did marry Burk, and I'm *not* in your parlor."

She raised a hand and laid it against his chest. "But I'm here. Why do you think I've come?"

"You're selling tickets for the church supper," he said, then his tone became exasperated. "I told you before to leave me alone, Sally."

Her hand moved up his shirt front and caressed his cheek. He stood immobile for a moment, only a muscle in his jaw moving. Then his restraint gave way and he pulled her to him savagely. "Damn you!" he said and kissed her, his tightly-folded arms shutting off her breath.

IT WAS a long kiss, the kind he remembered from long ago. She clung to him. "You're fire," he said hoarsely. "You think I've ever got over it?"

"Neither of us have," she said in a fierce whisper. "Reilly, it never did end for us! You must know that."

Her words were like a dash of cold water. Dropping his arms, he moved slightly away from her, once more composed and on guard. "It's ended," he said with finality. "It ended when you married Burk Seever. Neither of us can change that now."

"There's a way. You know there's a way."

"Shut up about it!" His voice was tight. He touched her on the arm. "You'd better go back to town. He'll find out. Someone will tell him."

"I don't care."

"I do care," he said, and raised his voice. "Bucks!" When Milo came to the doorway, Reilly said, "Get Mrs. Seever's buggy around here."

Milo was off the porch and had started to walk around the house when he halted, his head cocked to one side like a dog listening. Out on the flats, a horse's hoofs were beating a steady tattoo.

"Somebody's coming," he said.

"I got ears," Reilly snapped. "Get that buggy in the barn."

He tried to steer Sally into the house, but she shook free of his grip and crouched in the deep shadows.

"I like it here," she whispered. "If it's Burk, I want to see this."

Bucks had the team now and was leading the horses across the yard at a trot. He had just closed the barn door when a rider entered the yard and reined in at the porch steps. The light revealed Tess Isham, and Reilly let out a relieved breath as he came down to lift her from her side-saddle.

She paused with her hands on his shoulders a minute, then said, "I came as fast as I could, Reilly. I think Burk's on his way here, and he's hopping mad." She peered past him, trying to pierce the darkness along the wall. "Sally's here, isn't she?"

"Yes," Reilly said. "She was just leaving when we heard your horse."

"It's too late. I can't be more than ten minutes ahead of Buck."

She slid past Reilly and ran up onto the porch. Without ceremony she grabbed Sally's arm and hustled her into the house.

She said, "You fool, Sally! Haven't you any sense?"

"Don't preach to me," Sally snapped.

"Oh!" Tess bit her lip. Tears of helpless rage filled her eyes, but she shook them away. "Is there any place we can hide, Reilly?"

"I don't like hiding," he said. "Better to face a thing out."

"Then you're a fool, too," she said, and started down the hall. Over her shoulder she asked, "Which is your room?"

"The one on the end," he said.

He watched until the door closed.

Then Milo came across the porch and stopped in the doorway, his face grave and faintly worried. "I put the other horse away, too," he said, and leaned against the door frame. "Looks like a big night ahead, doesn't it?"

"Quit being funny," Reilly said, and pushed past him. Another rider had left the road and was coming across the flats now.

"You want me to stick around?" Bucks asked.

"If you want. No trouble now, no matter how this turns out."

"All right," Bucks said, went into the parlor, and swept some junk off a chair so he could sit down.

Reilly walked out to the porch and waited. Burk Seever pulled up a few minutes later and dismounted, stalking immediately to the foot of the steps.

"Reilly," he said, "I've come for my wife."

"She's not here, Burk." Reilly was surprised at how even his voice was.

"I say she is here," Burk said. "After I get her, I'm going to kill you."

"I said she isn't here!"

"You're a liar, Reilly. She was seen leaving the house, all rigged for a night ride." He came up one step. "I'm going to have a look around. Don't try to stop me."

"Make a fool out of yourself if you want to," Reilly said, and moved aside.

SEEVER strode into the hall and Reilly followed. The big man glanced into the parlor and saw Milo Bucks sitting in a chair.

"Well," Seever said softly, his face wrinkling into a grin, "if it isn't the rooster! I've still got to pull out a handful of your tail feathers, haven't I?"

"Not tonight," Bucks said, and stared at Seever.

The big man laughed, then stalked to the kitchen, giving it a thorough going over.

Turning back to Reilly he said softly, "Where's your bedroom?"

"At the end of the hall," Reilly said.

Seever took three steps toward the door, then stopped as if struck. The bedroom door flew open suddenly and Tess Isham came out, said, "Oh!" in a startled voice and ducked part way behind the door. She had removed her heavy riding dress and two petticoats and now wore only a thin shift that revealed bare shoulders and legs.

Seever stood motionless, then wheeled and stamped out of the house. His boots rattled off the porch and saddle leather protested as he swung up. Reilly stood and listened to the receding sound of hoofbeats.

There was no sound in the house for a tense moment, then Reilly went outside, shaking, with a film of sweat on his face. He knew that he would always remember Tess as she had appeared for that brief moment—desperate, frightened, and proud in a moment that held only degradation for her. When his thoughts became unbearable, he wheeled and walked rapidly to his room, flinging the door open without bothering to knock.

Sally was standing at the foot of the four-poster bed, her face composed. Tess was sitting on the bed, still clad in the thin shift, her slim legs crossed and her hands folded placidly in her lap. She was staring at some invisible spot on the floor and did not seem aware that anyone else was present.

Reilly glanced at Sally and said, "Wait for me outside."

"But—"

"Do as I tell you!"

"All right, Reilly," she said and moved past him with a rustle of skirts.

She glanced at Tess before she closed the door, and smiled faintly. Reilly waited until her footsteps faded, then dropped to one knee and took Tess Isham's hands in his.

"Tess." She raised her head and looked at him and her eyes brimmed with unshed tears. "You wonderful fool, Tess."

He folded her against him. She cried in earnest then. For minutes he held her, his arms around her, then she pushed away from him and hurriedly slipped into her petticoats

and dress, as though just now conscious of her near nudity.

He watched her fasten the buttons, then said, "She wasn't worth that, Tess. Why didn't you let him look?"

"I wasn't thinking of her," Tess said softly, not looking at him. She moved to the door and opened it, pausing without turning. "You would have shot him, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," he said honestly. "I would have."

He could only stand there, dumbly as the full implication of her act registered. She had not ruined her reputation for her sister. *She had done it for him!* Nothing would ever be the same for her now. Talk would get around, and men would come to the bakery who had never thought of trading in the store.

Tess said, "You would never have found happiness with her if you had killed him, Reilly."

"Tess--wait!" He moved toward her, but as she stiffened he halted.

"Don't touch me, Reilly! I have to go now."

She moved down the hall and he came after her. Sally was waiting in the yard and Milo Bucks appeared from the barn with the team and buggy. Tess's horse was tied to the back. Going immediately to her horse, she took a hand up while Milo waited for Sally to settle herself in the rig.

Reilly had taken Sally's elbow to help her when she whirled and flung her arms around his neck, holding him even as he pushed at her angrily. Her lips met his, boldly demandingly. Then she released him with a small laugh.

As she climbed into the buggy, she gave Tess a direct glance. And the superior smile on Sally's face spoke of more triumphs than one. "I'll see you again, Reilly," she said and whipped the team with the reins.

He stood there until they left the yard. Then he turned toward the house, only dimly aware that Milo Bucks was following him. . . .

THE next morning Walt and Ernie Slaughter came over. They showed a marked inclination to sit around and talk, but Reilly put them to work digging post holes for the new corral.

In ten days they had the place cleaned out, the house painted, and the corral poles set. Reilly called a halt and announced that they would all go to town. For a moment Ernie Slaughter seemed stunned. He spread his callused, bleeding hands and said, "Darned if I think I can hold a whisky glass now. My hands just naturally fit a post hole digger."

"I'll saddle up," Walt said, and hurried to the barn.

Washing at the pump, Milo said to Reilly, "Feel that chill in the air? Snow's coming. A man can smell it It's going to be a long winter and a feller sort of looks forward to this last whoop-up before he pulls his head in."

"Still baying at the moon?"

"Man has the voice for it," Bucks said, drying his face on a flour sack.

Walt came from the barn leading four saddled horses, and Reilly went into the house for his gun.

"That reminds me," Milo said, and went in after his own.

They mounted and rode from the yard. Before they were off the flats around the hills, Reilly looked back. His corral sat there like a spindly-legged animal.

With the perverse nature of Westerners, they took their time because they were in a hurry. So it was nearly dark when they reached the end of the main street, where they reined up. Milo leaned forward in the saddle and crossed his arms over the horn. "Now that sure is a pretty thing, isn't it? Does it come apart easy?"

"Let's leave it stuck together," Reilly said. He lifted his reins and rode on, the others following him. At the restaurant they dismounted and filed in, taking a table in the far corner. The waitress set four cups of coffee on the table. After a couple of minutes of fooling, they managed to give their order.

Reilly sat hunched over in his chair, the hard lines from work not yet eased around his eyes and mouth.

Ernie said, "What the hell are we eating for? Burkhauser's got a bottle waiting for me."

"Later," Reilly said. "I'm sick of my own cooking."

The steaks arrived and they ate hurriedly and in silence. Reilly paid for the meals and they went outside onto the boardwalk, standing in a line, looking over the town.

Softly, Milo said, "You going to see her?"

"Think I'm crazy?" Reilly said. A part of his mind told him to put Milo in his place, but a glance at the young man told him the question had been innocent.

"Didn't mean *her*," Milo said. "I meant the younger one."

"I've caused her enough trouble," Reilly said.

He swung his head to look up and down the street. The traffic was growing heavier as more families came into town for the weekend shopping. He recognized Paul Childress's buggy tied up before the hotel.

DOWN the street, Burkhauser's doors winnowed as men came and went, and the throbbing strains of a small band issued forth. Walt began to get impatient. He nudged Reilly. "What do you say?"

Reilly smiled. "You thirsty?"

"Parched," Walt said. Reilly grinned.

They crossed the street, mounted the saloon porch, and went inside, heading immediately for the bar. Reilly bought a bottle and got four glasses from Elmer Loving, who still eyed him nervously. They took the bottle to a table. Walt poured, drank, and sat back, a sudden ease running through him.

"There's nothing like good whisky," he said, and poured another. "You know, I swore off once. Told myself I was a fool for women and whisky. Then I got to thinking —a fool's all I'll ever be anyway." He elevated his glass and grinned.

"Sure," Reilly said. He was nursing his drink. "There was a feller from Kalispell in the pen with me. We got to talking about the back street ladies and he said you'd always have 'em around wherever there are cowboys. For awhile that didn't make sense, but it does now. Working cattle is the loneliest job a man can have. He doesn't get to town often, and a good woman doesn't want to live in a soddy on thirty a month and found. So he gets roaring drunk, walks the back streets, then goes back in the hills again."

"What wound you up?" Ernie asked.

"Nothing," Reilly said. "I just want you to know you're in a hell of a business."

"Name me a better one," Walt challenged.

"I'm not trying to," Reilly said. He raised his eyes to Ernie Slaughter, who was staring over Reilly's right shoulder. "What's so blamed interesting?"

"Burk Seever and Indian Jim," Ernie said, "sitting there like big toads."

Reilly turned in his chair to see for himself. Seever and Indian Jim were in the corner, a bottle between them, in earnest conversation. "Burk's getting bold," Reilly said softly. "Everyone knows Indian Jim's in the wild bunch."

"Bold or big," Walt said.

The crowd in Burkhauser's was growing. Jim Buttelow came in with Al Murdock, waved, then sat down at a table across the room. The musicians were trying to get together on a number and the curtain went up. Jane Alford came out to sing. She wore a red dress that ended just below her hips and her tapered legs glistened in the yellow glow of the footlights.

Noises began to die down as she went into the song, a sad tale about a wandering father and an unpaid mortgage. The applause was scattered and indifferent, and men began to pick up their dropped conversation before she walked off the stage.

Reilly glanced at Ernie, who was sitting with his hat tipped forward over his eyes, his face boxed in shadows. Reilly understood there had once been something between Ernie and Jane, but Ernie had made no mention of it and Reilly knew of no way of bringing it up without prying, a thing he would not do.

"Are we holding a wake or something?" Walt asked. But no one brightened.

Reilly looked again at Burk Seever. Somehow he kept remembering the expression on Seever's face when Tess Isham had stepped out into the hallway, half-dressed. The fact that Seever could carry that picture of Tess in his mind drove Reilly to a wild rage.

Turning back to his friends he said, "I think I can lick that big slob."

"Seever?" Their heads came up.

"Yes."

"Man," Walt said, trying to grin the idea away, "you're crocked."

"Cold sober," Reilly told him and looked at Seever again. "I mean it. I got my reasons for trying."

Ernie said, "This must be your wake we're celebrating." His smile faded and he bent forward. "You're serious!"

REILLY slid his chair back and touched Milo on the shoulder. "Keep the redskin off my back, will you?"

"Just you worry about the big one," Milo said, as they began threading their way through the crowd. Milo moved off at a quiet tangent.

Indian Jim abruptly stopped talking when Reilly dropped a hand on his shoulder and said, "Take a walk for yourself."

"Well," Seever said, "I'm surprised you could leave her alone long enough to come to town."

"I want to talk to you about that," Reilly murmured, and glanced at Indian Jim, who was still seated. "I won't tell you again, Jim."

"He's bluffing," Seever said. "Sit still."

"Am I?" Reilly smiled, and then backhanded Indian Jim out of the chair. The man hit the floor, grunted in surprise, then went for his gun. Reilly kicked out and sent the gun spinning.

Milo's cool voice said, "Forget him. He'll behave himself."

Facing Seever at the table, Reilly leaned on the edge of it and said, "Burk, I think you and I have a waltz coming up."

"Not with a gun," Seever said. "Insult me all you want with that gun on, but take it off and I'll tear your face apart."

"I think you've made a deal." Reilly unbuckled his shell belt.

A ring of men had formed quickly, and there was little talk in the barroom now.

Reilly saw Walt raise his hand, and threw him his gun. He did not hear it hit, so he knew Walt had caught it.

"There's no gun now," Reilly said to Seever and waited, his hands again gripping the edge of the table.

[*Turn page*]

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The only sound in the room was the ticking of the big wall clock.

Because Reilly had fought Seever off and on all his life, he knew the man's style, was waiting for the first rush. Other than that, Reilly felt different about this fight. He was not angry, not as he usually was when he and Burk tangled. Before this he had been wild with rage, but now he felt like a butcher getting ready to turn a side of beef into choice cuts.

Burk's hands dropped to the table edge and he threw his weight against it, shoving. This was calculated to push Reilly back and bring the table over on top of him, but Reilly pulled a scant second before Seever pushed and it was the big man who lost his balance. Propelled by his own impetus, Seever sprawled face down, knocking cards and chips to the floor and sending a bottle kiting.

The sprawl carried Seever a good ten feet. Reilly backed until his shoulder was against Walt Slaughter's chest. Walt pressed the cold neck of a whisky bottle into Reilly's hand and said, "Take it. We can get another one."

Catching Seever as he rose, Reilly swung his arm in a chopping arc and brought the bottle down across the crown of Seever's head. Whisky and fragments of glass sprayed into the sawdust.

Behind Reilly, Walt Slaughter hit a man, driving him back and, when the man came at him again, Walt hefted another bottle and fractured it. Reilly heard a body hit loosely but did not glance back. For Seever was now a huge worry in Reilly's mind. The man was getting up!

The big man was half-stunned but he rolled over, propping himself up on all fours like a bear. Reilly threw the jagged neck of the bottle away and, seizing a chair, splintered it over Seever's head and shoulders.

A mild commotion built up behind him and Reilly shot a quick glance backward. Walt was standing over the man he had downed. Ernie was by his side. They were facing four men who had ideas about getting into this, but were making no move to start anything.

Burk Seever had been flattened by the last blast, but again he gathered himself and rolled, his knees doubled up to protect his belly. When he came erect, Reilly moved in on him with an oak chair leg.

SEEVER was dizzy and weaving. Reilly hit him with his fist, a blow that merely bounced off although he had put all his power into it. Seever was an animal beneath that veneer of good looks—big-boned indestructible animal. Reilly went at him with the chair leg as if it were a setting maul, opening up ugly cuts on Seever's face and hands. This was different from hitting with the fist and bringing quick blood. A fist distributes power over a wider area and has some give to it, but the oak chair leg left gashes that reached to the bone. The wounds were white and shocked, not bleeding much at all for the moment.

With a mind numb from the sledging, Seever pawed out blindly, and Reilly went over backward in a flailing somersault. There had not been full power in the blow, but it had punished severely. Reilly rolled to his feet, shaking his head in an effort to determine whether or not his neck had been broken. His whole left side was numb.

Moving forward, Seever planted his feet solidly, almost blindly. Reilly stood up in time to duck a wild swing that would have torn his head off, then jabbed viciously with the chair leg. This wrung a grunt from Seever, nothing more. Then the big man tried to grapple.

Understanding that he was a dead duck should Seever ever manage to get his arms around him, Reilly struck out with the oak leg, cracking it across his antagonist's heavy forearm. Seever's eyes grew round with shock and he stood there flatfooted, looking at a sliver of bone sticking through his bloody coat sleeve.

His fancy vest had been torn open and blood made red splashes on his white shirt front. The two fighting men faced each other, exposing an animal hatred that was cellular, rather than the product of logical resentments. Reilly charged, and split open a four-inch gash over Seever's eyebrows, then threw the chair leg away.

He speared Seever in the mouth with his

fist, while some man in back of Reilly jumped in sudden fright. When Reilly stepped to one side and looked, Milo Bucks had his pearl-handled pistol out covering three men who stood against the bar. One was Indian Jim, who was scowling heavily.

Bleeding freely across the face now, Seever moaned and moved toward Reilly like a mechanical man.

"This is the kiss-off, bully boy," Reilly said, and hit Seever a wicked blow in the stomach. Behind it was strength fed by many galling defeats in the past, beatings taken from this man with no hope of repayment. He had worn Seever numb. Now he wanted to cut him down with his bare hands.

Reilly closed in with a vengeance.

This was a near fatal mistake, for Reilly misjudged the man's brute staying power. Seever reached out with his good hand and grabbed Reilly by the neck, bringing him to his knees with the power of the grip.

There was a great difference in weight here. Reilly weighed no more than a hundred and seventy, while Seever topped that by fifty pounds of brawn and muscle, and stood a head taller.

As Reilly gasped, Seever butted forward with his bloody head, smashing it against Reilly's cheekbone. Dimly Reilly recalled a Negro in prison who had killed another inmate, playing pop-skull. Men fought that way, breaking the bones of another man's face with their own heads.

The blow left him sick and half-conscious, and Seever used Reilly's face like an extension of his own fist, battering it against his massive brow until blood ran from Reilly's mouth and nose.

With a head that felt beat out of shape, Reilly felt the sudden pain revive him, and he gathered his strength for one last try. That one was all he would get, for he was near gone now. Using his feet like flails he raked Seever's shins, then cracked the hard heel of his boot down across the man's instep.

A howl of pain rewarded him, and he felt a slackening of the grip. Breaking free, he raised one knee and caught the big man

[*Turn page*]

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squarely. All the blood drained from Seever's face and he doubled over, his eyes suddenly glazed. Whirling, Reilly lifted a chair, then threw it aside in disgust.

He'd finish this with his hands!

BRINGING one up from the floor, he connected solidly. Seever arched backward and struck the floor with enough force to bring bottles down behind the bar.

More dead than alive, it took Seever two minutes to get to his feet. He swayed there, blood blinding him. He walked in a short, choppy circle, bent over like a chicken searching for bugs. His movement had no direction; it was just movement.

Then Reilly began to stalk him.

He forced Seever back against a supporting post and tacked him there with a whistling fist. He beat the big lawyer with a steady cadence of blows, literally supporting him with the killing power of his fists.

Seever did not lift his hands once.

Finally Reilly stepped back, and Seever fell like a heavy tree. A picture on the wall broke free of its hanger, showering glass as the frame struck the baseboard.

A man broke the stillness when he said, reverently, "Holy Moses!"

Reilly stood there, legs spread wide to keep from falling, the wind tearing in and out of lungs that were on fire. A muttering began to grow, and Ernie Slaughter gave a shrill whoop. But Milo Bucks said something in a quietly dangerous voice and it held men motionless.

Reilly felt the power drain from his legs.

Milo said something more to Indian Jim and a fist struck meatily. Then Indian Jim was on the floor, daubing at a bloody nose, and Milo's voice came easy and without strain.

"You fellers want more'n you can handle, then step right up."

Walt and Ernie carried Reilly outside to the watering trough. By the time he could stand, the doctor had come from across the street and Burk Seever was being carried away on an improvised stretcher. Henderson hurried down the street and tried to break through the small crowd around Reilly at the watering trough.

Pistol still in hand Milo said, "You're not needed here."

"Don't tell me," Henderson said, suddenly angry.

The short barrel of Milo's Frontier Colt arced up, hit the sheriff a solid blow, and Henderson wilted. Putting the gun away, Milo said, "That's for nothing, tin star." He was cold now, a man driving with a powerful force burning within him. The men crowding around the trough felt this too, and they moved away one by one.

Reilly wiped a hand across his mouth and decided he was not damaged as badly as he had thought. There was a cut over his left eye and his bottom lip was split on the inside, but his nosebleed had stopped. He decided he felt fine.

He glanced at Henderson. "I'm going to get a new shirt," he said, and walked across the street, the tatters of his old one flapping.

He made his purchase, changed, and went back out. Milo Bucks was nowhere in sight and Reilly wanted to talk to him. The young cowboy had proved to be something of a big man in the saloon.

Ernie came over then and asked, "How you feeling?"

"Like somebody took an ax to me."

Ernie snorted, busy fashioning a smoke. "Doc hasn't brought Burk around yet and Henderson's nursing a split head where Milo belted him. That little rooster Bucks has a craw full of sand, hasn't he?"

"He'll do. Where's he now?"

"Down the street with Walt."

He looked up and down the street, halting his gaze when Jane Alford came to the saloon batwings. She looked over the top at Ernie a pointed moment, then turned back. "See you," Ernie said, and walked away.

ERNIE crossed over, moved along darkened store fronts, then slipped through a gap and traversed the length of an alley. In the inky blackness he carefully skirted the stacked litter. Three doors down, the saloon back door opened flush with a loading platform, and Ernie moved toward it. He slid past the back of the feed store, jumped when Jane Alford reached through the darkness to touch him. "You gave me a scare," he said.

"Talking's better here," Jane said. "Burkhauser's walls are too thin." She shivered slightly, for her shoulders were bare and the night held a sharp chill. She looked up and down the alley. "Get Reilly out of town while he's still alive."

Ernie's relaxed manner changed to caution. "What's going on, Jane?" He touched her soft shoulder and, when she didn't draw away, pulled her closer. "Jane—"

"Ernie! No, Ernie!"

Her voice was like hands pushing against him, but a part of his mind was closed to it. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness and he saw the pale oval of her face, the gentle bow of her lips, and pulled her still closer against him.

His was the kiss of hunger and loneliness and of a man in love when he knew there is no hope, no certain happy ending. For a heartbeat her arms hung at her sides, then she moaned softly and clung to him, returning his love, leaving him shaken.

That moment passed, and her hands became pushing hands until she was free. He looked at her with solemnity and wonder, unable to believe what she had said without words.

"You've been lying to me, Jane," Ernie declared, the words tumbling together in his haste to say them all. "You love me—you've never stopped." He caught her shoulders and shook her. "I know something's after you, something you won't tell me about, but come with me, Jane. Nothing will ever bother you."

"You're talking like a moon-struck schoolboy," she said quickly. "Now do as I tell you and get Reilly out of Buckeye."

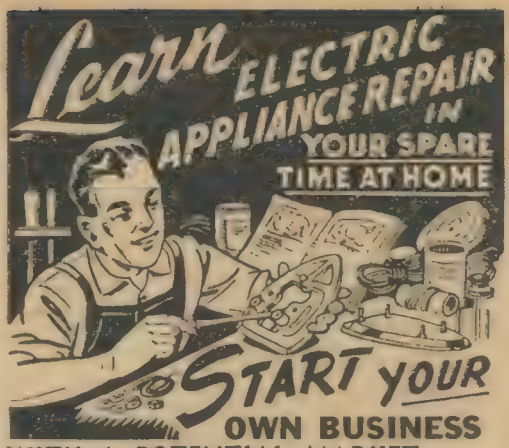
"I want to marry you," Ernie pleaded. "Once you wanted to marry me too, Jane. You don't belong in a saloon—or with Burk Seever, either."

"I suppose you'll be noble and say it doesn't matter?"

"It doesn't," he said earnestly. "Whatever reasons you had would suit me. I'd never ask what they were."

"You're not fooling me," Jane said. "I know how it would be. You'd work on me and pester me until you found out, then

[*Turn page*]



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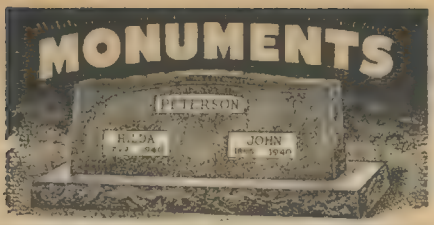

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you'd throw me out." She shook her head and her ringlets stirred. "That's not for me, Ernie. I don't want to work my life away on some quarter section. I told you that before."

"You love me, and you can't hide it," he insisted.

"Get out of here now," she said flatly. "Go on. Take your friend and beat it."

"All right," Ernie said, and touched her on the cheek. She slapped his hand away.

"You got away with it once," she snapped. "Don't press your luck."

"You're not fooling me, Jane," he repeated. "I'll wait. Whatever's hanging over your head's going to show itself some day, and when I find out you'll be free mighty quick."

"Ernie," she said, touching him impulsively, "be careful with that kind of talk. Just get Reilly out of town."

"I'll see what I can do." He sighed and turned away. "I'll see you again, Jane. I got lots of time."

"Don't count on it," she told him, and watched him walk down the alley.

REILLY was sitting on a bench in front of the mercantile when Ernie came out on the street. He crossed over and hunkered down.

"Have a good visit?" Reilly asked.

"I guess," Ernie drawled. "Jane says for you to get out of town, Reilly. She seemed right worried about your health."

Reilly spun his smoke into the street. "That's interesting. What else?"

"Nothing else. Wouldn't say what or anything but just get out."

"Something's in the wind maybe?"

Ernie snorted. "You crimp Burk's style; Milo plays skull ball with Indian Jim and Henderson; and you want to know what's in the wind." He stood up. "I'll get Walt and the kid and we'll clear out. What do you say?"

"I'm with you," Reilly said, flipping his head around as a tin can clattered along the street.

There was little movement along the walks. Two men sat before the shoemaker's shop talking. A man was walking in the other direction, a half-block up.

"That's peculiar," Reilly murmured, and shifted until shadows masked him. "Where'd that come from? That tin can?" His eyes scanned carefully, pausing at each gap between buildings. Then full awareness hit him, and he gave Ernie a shove that sent the cowboy sprawling.

The dark slot this side of the saloon bloomed like a sunflower, and a rifle bullet puckered the plank walk near Reilly's feet.

Reilly pulled his gun and fired hurriedly at the muzzle flash, and was plunging for the street when caution checked him. Ernie, rolling to a sitting position, stood up, beating clouds of dust from his levis.

"Dammit," he said.

A clerk came out of the store, asking questions in a high, excited voice.

"Get a lantern," Reilly said, and the man hurried back inside.

By the time he came back a good-sized crowd had gathered. Reilly held the light low to examine a chewed spot on the boardwalk. He whistled softly when he recovered the lead. "A forty eighty-two! That boy wasn't hunting quail."

Milo and Walt came pushing their way through the crowd. Bucks slanted Reilly a glance, but said nothing.

Ernie yelled to the crowd, "Let's break it up! The fun's over."

"Didn't look like fun to me," a man in the bunch said as he turned away.

The crowd broke into chattering groups, leaving the four men standing before the store.

"That was the try I was telling you about," Ernie said softly.

"What were you telling him?" Walt asked.

"Never mind," Reilly said. "Get the horses, Milo. We're going home."

"It's time," Bucks agreed. "We've had ourselves a real ball." He walked down the street, whistling softly between his teeth.

When Bucks came back with the horses Reilly and the Slaughters mounted. Childress left the hotel porch and walked toward them.

"Wait a minute," Reilly said.

After a quick glance at Reilly's face,

[*Turn page*]

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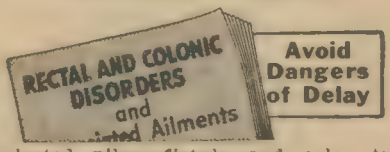

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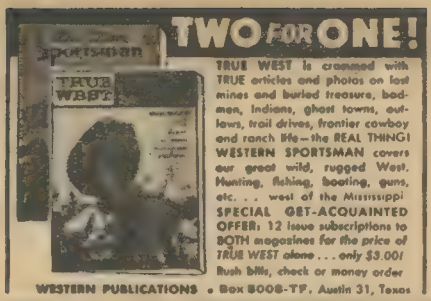
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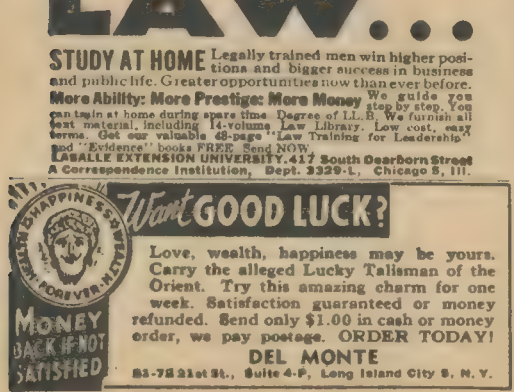
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Childress said, "Well, you always wanted to lick him, didn't you?"

"Is that what you came here to tell me?"

"No," Childress said. "We're moving stock tomorrow. You ready for it?"

"We'll take care of it," Reilly assured him. "Anything else on your mind, Paul?"

"There might be," Childress admitted. "I'd like to talk to you later, if you're not in a hurry. I have a room at the hotel."

Reilly nodded. He said to the others, "I'll meet you at the ranch in the morning."

ERNIE said softly, "I think I'll stay, too." He gave Reilly a blunt look that invited argument.

"Take this, then," Milo said, and unbuckled his gun. "Seems like this here's a real live town and a man isn't sure what he'll run into." He grinned and wheeled his horse. Walt followed him, and they rode out of town.

"I'll see you at the hotel," Childress murmured, and walked down the street, bent over to light his pipe.

Reilly and Ernie dismounted and retied the horses in front of the store. Ernie fidgeted a moment with the reins, then said, "You're a big fool for sure. Somebody wants to keep you in town and you're breaking your neck to be obliging."

"Paul?"

Ernie said, disgusted, "I didn't say that."

They headed for the restaurant down the street, by common consent. The activity in town had died down a little. Families were already heading home. Bloom was closing his barbershop when Ernie and Reilly paused before it.

Peering at the cuts on Reilly's face, Bloom said, "I got just the thing for them."

"What? Cutting my head off?"

"I'm serious," Bloom said. "I've patched up worse."

Footsteps rattled on the steps, and Bloom turned the key in the lock and walked off. The doctor came down to the street level from his office. He smelled strongly of shag tobacco and chemicals. Behind him stalked Sheriff Henderson, a white bandage around his head.

Henderson scowled and, when the doctor tried to speak, the sheriff gave him a shove that sent him off the boardwalk. "I want to tell you something, Reilly," Henderson snapped. "I'm declaring open season on that smart-aleck friend of yours."

"Better be careful," Reilly said. "He's got a whale of a stinger." He turned as though to leave, then stopped. "How's Burk?"

"He's in bad shape," Henderson said. "You hit him with a lot of furniture." He stepped up to Reilly and tapped him on the chest with his finger. "Burk *may* die, tough guy, and if he does I'll be after you with a warrant."

"Somebody took a shot at me tonight," Reilly said. "Where were you?"

"With Burk and the Doc," Henderson snapped. "Reilly, you're in a tight. Fooling around with a man's wife is serious business."

When Reilly hit him it was with a suddenness that shocked even Ernie Slaughter. Henderson went back against the wall of the barbershop, both arms flailing to keep his balance, but Reilly was on him before he could set himself.

He hit the sheriff again, a spearing blow that brought the man to his knees, then cracked him on the base of the neck with a down-sledging fist.

"Leave him alone!" Ernie ordered.

"Keep out of this," Reilly said, and moved toward Henderson again. "Get up, big mouth! You want a fight, you can have one."

"No," Henderson said.

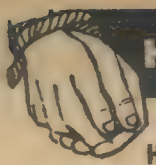
"Then get out of my sight," Reilly said.

The sheriff tried to stand. Reilly kicked out, driving Henderson's feet from under him. Reilly said, "Crawl away. Don't walk."

Henderson began to inch toward the street on hands and knees. He went into the dust and had nearly reached the center before he stood erect and weaved on into the saloon ahead. The few men standing in the doorway parted to let him pass through, but said nothing.

Reilly watched the sheriff's retreat. Finally Ernie Slaughter said, "That was your first big mistake, Reilly. You were wrong, dead wrong. One way or another he's going to make you pay for that."

(To be continued in the next issue)



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